

# Improving your English Pronunciation

Phillip Backley

## 1 Introduction

To become competent users of a second language, learners must focus on various different aspects of the language they are attempting to learn. At high school, second language learning tends to emphasize the importance of grammar and vocabulary, as these are easy to teach to large classes, and furthermore, are easy to test by written exam. This approach often causes other aspects of the second language to be neglected, however, particularly the practical skills that allow learners to actually use the language for real communication. It is all too common to find good students of English who are in effect tongue-tied – they have an extensive knowledge of the written language but lack the ability or confidence to use spoken English as a communication tool. Yet in reality, communication skills are not nearly as difficult to acquire as English language learners may think. If regular speaking practice is introduced from an early stage, together with the opportunity to hear native speakers using the language in its natural form, then it is possible for students to become as comfortable with spoken English as they are with written English.

One aspect of spoken English which can be improved without too much effort is pronunciation. In this paper I describe two characteristics of English pronunciation which learners can focus on in order to make their spoken English sound more confident, more proficient, and easier to understand. The

first of these is the appropriate use of weak vowels, such as schwa, in unstressed syllables. This is explored in section 3. The second concerns the use of weak forms in longer utterances, which is essential for producing sentence-level rhythm. This is the focus of section 4. The discussion begins in section 2 with comments on the importance of acquiring a good pronunciation.

## **2 Why does pronunciation matter ?**

Subconsciously, listeners make quick (and often, unfair) judgments about a speaker's English ability based on his pronunciation. No matter how accurate a learner's grammar, and no matter how rich and expressive his vocabulary, if his pronunciation is poor then this immediately gives a negative impression of his overall language level. Poor pronunciation can be difficult to listen to, as it demands greater effort and concentration on the part of the listener. In addition, poor pronunciation can lead to misunderstandings, even a breakdown in communication. On the other hand, if a speaker has a clear pronunciation, this has immediate benefits : listeners judge the speaker's overall language ability much more favourably, even to the point of tolerating grammatical and other errors. Moreover, a good pronunciation is an asset to the speaker himself, as it provides him with a valuable confidence boost.

It is important to note here that 'good' pronunciation does not mean 'native-like' pronunciation. In fact, if an English learner aims to sound like a native English speaker he will soon be disappointed, as this is neither a realistic goal nor a necessary goal. Instead, the aim should be to acquire a 'listener-friendly' pronunciation – one which listeners can understand without

effort and which can be used to make meaningful conversation possible. If the listening task is too effortful, listeners will simply stop listening.

### 3 Weak vowels

Fortunately, there are several ways in which English learners can improve their pronunciation once they have identified the main pitfalls. In the case of Japanese learners of English, the most significant improvement they can make is to begin incorporating weak vowels into their English, specifically the ‘schwa’ vowel [ə]. Before this can happen, however, learners must recognise two basic points about English pronunciation. First, in spoken English not all syllables (or beats) are of equal importance – some are naturally stronger than others. And knowing when and how to pronounce weak syllables can make a speaker’s pronunciation more natural. Second, English spelling does not tell you how to pronounce English vowels. For example, the vowels in the underlined syllables in (1) have exactly the same sound, despite having different spellings. All are pronounced [ə]. (Non-rhotic pronunciations are used throughout this paper.)

- (1)     offer     [ˈɒfə]  
          sofa     [ˈsəʊfə]  
          forget   [fəˈget]

The position of weak vowels is determined by stress, or more precisely, the absence of stress. All content words in English (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives) have a characteristic stress pattern which usually comprises a single

stressed syllable together with a variable number of unstressed syllables around it. Most unstressed syllables are pronounced with a weak vowel such as [ə]. By contrast, spoken Japanese does not employ word stress in this way, and consequently, it is natural for Japanese learners of English to ignore the significance of stress when speaking English. (Note that, for similar reasons, English speakers typically ignore pitch accent patterns when learning Japanese.) And this is unfortunate, because stress is unquestionably a key aspect of English pronunciation, especially for listeners.

The listening process is partly one of decoding : to understand spoken language we must look up the words we hear in our mental lexicon, rather like using a paper dictionary or electronic dictionary. But unlike a conventional dictionary, in which entries are arranged in alphabetical (or kana) order, the words in our mental lexicon are organised according to their stress pattern, at least for native speakers of English. This point is made by Brown (1990).

*The stress pattern of a word is a very important identifying feature of the word... We store words under stress patterns... and we find it difficult to interpret an utterance in which a word is pronounced with the wrong stress pattern—we begin to “look up” possible words under this wrong stress pattern. (Brown 1990 : 51)*

Thus, the stress pattern of a word gives that word its characteristic shape. And it is this shape which native English speakers rely on as a cue to identifying individual words in running speech. For example, the pairs of words in (2) contain the same segments but differ in their stress pattern ; and owing to this difference in stress, it is highly unlikely that native listeners would ever confuse them. Stressed syllables are underlined.

- (2)     differing            vs.     deferring  
         insight            vs.     incite  
         desert            vs.     dessert

Clearly, then, it is crucial that English learners pay attention to stress in their spoken English. By doing so their speech will be more natural, and in addition, their listeners will understand them more easily.

The schwa vowel [ə] is the most common English vowel sound. It occurs in every sentence of spoken English, yet it can cause problems even for advanced Japanese learners of English because it is not a native Japanese sound. The first problem is to do with producing the [ə] sound itself. There are many textbooks on English phonetics that provide descriptions of the tongue position and lip position needed for pronouncing [ə] correctly, but in reality these descriptions are not helpful. The most effective way for students to master the [ə] sound is to listen regularly to native speakers and to copy what they hear. Good pronunciation always starts with careful listening.

The second problem concerns knowing where [ə] should be pronounced. In fact, predicting the occurrence of [ə] in English sentences follows from what has already been said in the preceding paragraphs : the distribution of [ə] is determined by the stress pattern, not the spelling. It is restricted to unstressed syllables ; and generally speaking, most unstressed syllables have the potential to be pronounced with a [ə] vowel. In the words in (3), for example, all the unstressed vowels (underlined) are typically produced as [ə].

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(3)	<i>garden</i>	[ˈgɑ : dən]
	<i>avoid</i>	[əˈvɔɪd]
	<i>octopus</i>	[ˈɒktəpəs]
	<i>collection</i>	[kəˈlekʃən]

Notice that, by modelling pronunciation on spelling—in the way that many English learners do, simply because they have not been taught to do otherwise—it is inevitable that an unnatural pronunciation (i.e. without [ə]) will result. For instance, *garden* [ˈgɑ : dən] is likely to be produced incorrectly as \*[ˈgɑ : dɛn]. Now, a speaker who pronounces the non-native form \*[ˈgɑ : dɛn] will have no problems in being understood. But it is instantly recognisable as an example of ‘learners’ English’. Moreover, listeners are likely to form negative judgments of the speaker’s overall language ability, as described in section 2. The point here is that [ə] does not have a spelling of its own : it is controlled by stress, and stress patterns are not encoded in the English spelling system.

As already mentioned, it is not uncommon to find learners of English ignoring word stress altogether. And even when they do try to include stress in their pronunciation, they are often unsure about which syllable of the word should carry the stress. Furthermore, if they cannot be sure where stress goes, then it follows that they cannot be sure where to pronounce weak vowels either, since vowel weakening is the antithesis of stress—it takes place only in unstressed syllables. In this regard, however, something which should help students is the fact that most affixes in English are unstressed, so they are usually pronounced with a weak [ə]. Most cases of English affixation involve suffixes. In the following suffixed forms, stress falls on the root or stem while

the suffix has a weak vowel.

- (4)     *sing* + *er*     → *sing*[ə]*r*     *music* + *ian*     → *musici*[ə]*n*  
          *elect* + *ion*     → *electi*[ə]*n*     *danger* + *ous*     → *danger*[ə]*s*  
          *reach* + *able*     → *reach*[ə]*ble*     *sense* + *ible*     → *sens*[ə]*ble*  
          *waiter* + *ess*     → *waitr*[ə]*ss*     *pay* + *ment*     → *paym*[ə]*nt*  
          *dark* + *ness*     → *darkn*[ə]*ss*     *act* + *or*     → *act*[ə]*r*

It should now be apparent that the weak vowel [ə] is everywhere in spoken English. And if English learners manage to incorporate vowel weakening into their own speech, listeners will immediately sense a difference in the fluency and naturalness of their speaking style. To achieve this, learners must avoid the trap of allowing English spelling to influence their pronunciation, because [ə] does not correspond to a particular spelling in the written language.

#### 4 Weak forms

In the previous section it was shown how English learners can improve their pronunciation by producing a weak vowel [ə] in the weak syllables of a word. In most situations, however, we do not communicate in single words—natural speech involves longer utterances such as phrases and sentences. What, then, is the role of weak vowels in these larger stretches of speech? As we are about to see, vowel weakening in whole utterances follows the same principles as vowel weakening in single words: stressed syllables have ‘full’ (i.e. non-weakened) vowels while unstressed syllables usually have weak vowels. The difference we need to bear in mind is that whole utterances contain

a mixture of stressed words and unstressed words, where the latter are unstressed in their entirety and therefore contain only weak vowels. Compare the two ways of pronouncing *that* in the following utterances.

- (5) a. *I know that [ðæt] song.*  
b. *I know that [ðət] he's rich.*

Although they look identical in writing, *that* in (5a) and *that* in (5b) are actually different words with different pronunciations. The word *that* in (5a) is a demonstrative adjective, which allows it to have a stress. In fact content words in general (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives) are usually stressed. And because the adjective *that* is stressed, it has a full vowel, in this case [æ]. By contrast, the word *that* in (5b) is a grammatical (or 'function') word; as such, its purpose is not to add meaning to the sentence in the way that content words do, but to help make the sentence grammatical. In this case the verb *know* is followed by the clause *he's rich*, and the grammar of English requires this clause to be introduced by *that*. As a grammatical word, *that* is unstressed and pronounced in its weak form [ðət], which has the weak vowel [ə]. By distinguishing between stressed (content) words and weak (grammatical) words in this way, speakers are able to guide their listeners to the parts of their utterance that are important for meaning. The speaker's message is carried by content words, since these are the words with a lexical meaning; and as a way of drawing the listener's attention to these words, they are stressed. By contrast, grammatical words have little or no lexical meaning of their own, and thus do not contribute to the speaker's message. In fact they are relatively



unimportant for communication, which is shown by the fact that they are consistently pronounced with weak, unstressed vowels. The presence of a weak form such as *that* [ðət] serves as a signal to the listener, indicating that the word in question is not important from an information point of view. This is confirmed by the fact that the word *that* in (5b) may be omitted altogether (i.e. *I know he's rich*) without affecting the meaning of the utterance.

Most English learners find it fairly easy to identify the content words in an utterance, and by extension, to isolate the grammatical words. So when using spoken English it should be a straightforward matter to ensure that the grammatical words are unstressed and produced with the weak vowel [ə]. Typically, grammatical words belong to the following categories.

(6)	auxiliary verbs	<i>have, be, do, can...</i>
	prepositions	<i>to, from, of, at...</i>
	articles	<i>the, a, some...</i>
	pronouns	<i>you, your, her, we, them...</i>
	conjunctions	<i>and, but, or, as...</i>

Notice how the grammatical words in (6) are often difficult to translate into another language. Indeed this is in the very nature of grammatical words, given that they relate to the grammar of English rather than to a specific lexical meaning. To repeat the point made above, speakers play down the importance of grammatical words by producing them as weak forms. In the following sentences, weak forms are underlined.

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- (7) auxiliary verbs
- |       |   |
|-------|---|
| can   | <i>Sám <u>can</u> [kən] swím.</i>                 |
| has   | <i>The lésson <u>has</u> [həz]~[əz] fínished.</i> |
| shall | <i>I <u>shall</u> [ʃəl] téll you.</i>             |
| do    | <i>Whát <u>do</u> [də] they wánt?</i>             |
| are   | <i>There <u>are</u> [ə] nóne léft.</i>            |
| were  | <i>My fríends <u>were</u> [wə] láte.</i>          |
- prepositions
- |      |   |
|------|---|
| at   | <i>We'll méet <u>at</u> [ət] thrée.</i>         |
| for  | <i>Thánks <u>for</u> [fə] hélping.</i>          |
| from | <i>I wálked <u>from</u> [frəm] the státion.</i> |
| of   | <i>Twó bóttles <u>of</u> [əv] béer.</i>         |
| to   | <i>She wánted <u>to</u> [tə] léave.</i>         |
- articles
- |      |  |
|------|--|
| the  | <i>Shút <u>the</u> [ðə] dóor.</i>      |
| a    | <i>Táke <u>a</u> [ə] tríp.</i>         |
| some | <i>Try <u>some</u> [səm] of thése.</i> |
- pronouns
- |      |   |
|------|---|
| her  | <i>Téll <u>her</u> [hə]~[ə] the trúth.</i>    |
| you  | <i><u>You</u> [jə]~[ju] knów what I méan.</i> |
| your | <i>Táke <u>your</u> [jə] tíme.</i>            |
| them | <i>I'll gíve <u>them</u> [ðəm] a hánd.</i>    |
- conjunctions
- |     |  |
|-----|--|
| and | <i>Téa <u>and</u> [ənd] cóffee.</i>                          |
| or  | <i>Thrée <u>or</u> [ə] fóur tímes.</i>                       |
| as  | <i>I rán <u>as</u> [əz] quíckly <u>as</u> [əz] póssible.</i> |

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than     *Béttér than [ðən] béfore.*

that     *The book that [ðət] you órdered.*

Learners can take a further step towards improving their pronunciation by exploiting the difference described above between stressed and weak words. English is often described as a rhythmic or stress-timed language, which means that stressed syllables are spaced at approximately equal intervals – that is, in a rhythm. In the examples in (8), stressed words are written in upper case.

- (8)     THANKS for HELPING.  
         THANK you very MUCH for HELPING.  
         SHUT the DOOR.  
         SHUT the DOOR when you LEAVE.  
         TAKE this ROAD.  
         If you TAKE this ROAD you will COME to a RIVER.

A generalisation which emerges from (8) is that stressed syllables typically do not occur next to each other ; rather, they are separated by one or more weak words. This produces a regular alternation between strong and weak, which characterises spoken English as a whole. And as already mentioned, to produce a rhythmical pattern speakers try to allow roughly the same interval of time between each pair of strong syllables.

- (9) SHUT the DOOR when you LEAVE.

In (9), for example, the sequences [SHUT the] and [DOOR when you] should take about the same amount of time to pronounce. One consequence of this is that, in order to preserve the rhythm, speakers must alter their speech rate (i.e. become faster or slower) according to how many weak syllables there are between any two stresses. In practice, English speakers do this naturally and instinctively.

- (10) WHAT TIME ?  
WHAT'S the TIME ?  
WHAT was the TIME ?  
WHAT would be the TIME ?  
WHAT would have been the TIME ?

In (10), the stressed words *what* and *time* should be pronounced at approximately the same interval apart, no matter how many weak words intervene. Of course, the timing between stresses is relative rather than absolute ; after all, English speakers are humans and not robots-their spoken language carries a natural rhythm without becoming strictly regular in the fashion of a ticking clock.

## 5 Summary

From the preceding discussion it should be evident that the ability to speak in rhythm goes hand in hand with the ability to use weak forms. If

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learners of English become proficient at distinguishing between strong and weak syllables—within single words, and also between content words and grammatical words in longer utterances—then they will have established a useful base for reproducing the rhythmical patterns that characterise the natural speech of native English speakers. Listeners will immediately notice the improvement in fluency, and in many cases will be led to rate the speaker's overall level of English more highly as a result. Most English learners can improve their pronunciation without much difficulty, and it can make a real difference.

### Works Cited

Brown, Gillian. *Listening to Spoken English*. London : Longman, 1990. Print