

# DECODING THE STREAM OF SPEECH:

Teaching listening skills for  
understanding natural L2  
speech



Daniel Clayton

# A LITTLE ABOUT ME

BA Hons **Arabic and Russian**, University of Manchester  
PGDip **Applied Linguistics**, University of Birmingham  
Currently on the **MSc Linguistics** programme at York  
*(focusing on Syntax and Typology)*

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## Provisional Dissertation Topic

**Time Without Tense: A Typological Investigation into Tenseless Languages, their Mechanisms for Time Reference, and Theoretical Explanations**

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- Scrambling
- O-initial word orders (OVS, OSV)
- Pedagogy for listening decoding
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## Professional Background and Qualifications

- 3 EFL Teacher in France and Russia including time as Director of Studies of a private language school. CELTA, Delta qualifications

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2. What problems do learners typically encounter when trying to decode natural (and fast!) L2 speech?
3. What are the phonological characteristics of natural English speech that make it a challenge for learners?
4. How can listening skills be better taught?

Current Practice  
in L2 Listening Skills  
Development:  
**THE COMPREHENSION  
APPROACH**

# CURRENT METHODOLOGY FOR A SKILLS LISTENING LESSON

## Pre-listening:

- activate schemata around the context of the listening text
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## Post-listening:

- Focus on language patterns / functional language drawn from the text and/or unfamiliar lexis
- Follow up productive skills task related to the content of the text
- Often makes use of the transcript

# CRITIQUE OF THE CURRENT APPROACH

## Listening vs reading

- Almost an exact copy of the approach to reading
  - This is problematic due to the distinct differences between spoken and written language (more on this to come)



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- The usual advice to learners who struggle with listening comprehension is to 'listen more'.
- The focus is on the result rather than the process as little focus is paid to what makes listening challenging.
- Miscomprehension is often put down to not knowing enough vocabulary.

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## Unauthentic listening texts

- Audio recordings mostly don't demonstrate authentic speech:
  - recorded in a studio
  - scripted
  - careful speech
  - often sound unnatural

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## Unauthentic listening texts

- Audio recordings mostly don't demonstrate authentic speech:
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  - often sound unnatural
- However, more recent textbooks have attempted to rectify this such as having more natural dialogue and getting the voice actors to sound as natural as possible, such as by using connected speech

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## More practice

- When learners struggle with listening, they're often advised to 'practice more'

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## More practice

- When learners struggle with listening, they're often advised to 'practice more'
- Although exposure to the L1 is beneficial, it doesn't tackle problem of why learners don't understand well, that is, they can't decode what they hear even if their vocabulary is strong.

# The Challenges of Understanding Native Speech

# LISTENING VS READING

## Sight and sound

- 'sight substance' = “the visual, graphic shape of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs in writing that we see using our eyes.”
- 'sound substance' = “the auditory, acoustic shapes of words, word clusters, speech units and longer stretches of’ speech that we hear, using our ears.” (Cauldwell, 2018)

# LISTENING VS READING

Sight substance	Sound substance
Visible	Invisible
Remains in place	Disappears almost instantly
Spelling - stable	Many soundshapes
Reader can control reading speed	Speech speed difficult for the listener to control

# FLUENT SPEECH

## Other characteristics of fluent speech

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Written sentence – tidy and fluent:

*He ran all the way to the station.*

A version loaded with drafting phenomena would look more like this:

*Well, um, I mean, it was like **he** kind of like **ran** pretty much **all** um **the way to**, you know the, bus-stop, sorry not the bus stop, I meant to say **the station**.*

# THE STREAM OF SPEECH

...SAY... RIGHT... DON'T... NO... TEACH...  
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The Phonology of  
L1 Speech:  
**THE BOTANICAL METAPHOR**

# THREE STREAMS OF SPEECH



## GREENHOUSE

citation forms

heard in isolation

pauses before and after



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connected speech  
word boundaries  
affect sounds  
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## JUNGLE

fast, unruly, messy  
sounds squashed /mangled  
difficult to determine where  
one word starts and another  
begins



# THREE STREAMS OF SPEECH



i NEVer DID IT  
IN COLLege



i NEVer diditin  
COLLege



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# ELT AND THE CAREFUL SPEECH MODEL

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# ELT AND THE CAREFUL SPEECH MODEL

## ELT is comfortable with the Greenhouse and the Garden

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- There is a focus on rules and notions of correctness, and it is believed that “it should be as closely related to the sight substance as possible.” (Cauldwell, 2018)
- The Spontaneous Speech Model is neglected, either because it is challenging to understand, or teachers don’t know how to handle it and present it to learners.

# MENTAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WORDS

- The brain stores a lot of information about a word:
  - its meanings (denotation and connotation),
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- The sight substance of a word dominates learners' mental representation of it — we have a clear mental picture of how the word looks in the sight substance.
- Therefore, there is a strong association between the spelling and the citation-form soundshape. ELT is heavily biased towards this form.

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- Many coursebooks may highlight a limited set of connected speech features such as elision, assimilation, intrusion, etc., as well as about weak forms.
- More accurately, spontaneous fluent speech, but rather clusters of blended words which a busts of sound that are difficult to isolate.

that's gonna be / one of the / MAIN reasons / i THINK



# MULTIPLE SOUNDSHAPES

- **and** 
- **able to** 

# PHONOLOGICAL PROCESSES

- Linking rules – intrusion
  - my eyes /j/
  - law and order /r/
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  - handbag /ha<sup>m</sup>bag/
- words can lose their middles
  - actually /æktʃli/ ~ /ækʃli/

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- *mountain* loses *-tain* and becomes *mount* — another example of a **tail-clip**



A Way Forward for Teaching  
*Real* Listening Skills:  
LISTENING DECODING

# WHAT DO LEARNERS NEED?

... our goal as teachers of listening is to help our learners understand fast messy authentic speech ... The spoken language our learners need to comprehend is much more varied and unpredictable than what they need to produce in order to be intelligible ... **The goals for mastery are different**  
*Celce-Murcia, M. Brinton, D.M. and Goodwin, J.M. (with Barry Griner) Teaching Pronunciation 2nd Edition. Cambridge University Press*

# DECODING AND UNDERSTANDING

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- They can extract meaning with an automaticity
- Most ELT resources for listening take the approach to work at the level of understanding
- It is (perhaps?) expected that decoding skills will be acquired as a by-product of successful work on meaning.

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“Most native speakers are totally unaware of such simplification processes and are often surprised (or even shocked!) when these are pointed out to them.” (Collins & Mees, 2013)

- Consequently, L1 listeners are unreliable informants.
- If you ask how they pronounce words such as *and*, *bid* and *of* they 'will give the rare citation (accented) forms ... rather than the more common ... [weak forms]' (Gruttendon, 2014)

# THE BLUR GAP

Cauldwell (2018) has devised the term **The Blur Gap** to refer to the gap between what expert listeners believe they hear — typically, whole words in their Greenhouse citation forms — and what the sound substance actually contains — often only rough hints or slight traces of words.

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- They face the following problems:
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- They face the following problems:
  1. They hear a mush of a continuous stream of sound substance
  2. They cannot reliably match the mush to words they know
  3. They consequently do not understand the speaker's meaning
- But the biggest problem they face is the fact that — because of the blur gap - teachers, textbook and course book writers cannot share their experience of the mush. This is the problem of the decoding gap (Cauldwell, 2013).

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- This is because part of expert knowledge of a word is the ability to recognise it in all its soundshapes.

# METHODOLOGY

- The Botanical Walk

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- Word-crusher

	5	4	3	2	1
01	ba	BAM	ba ba ba ba	BAM	ba ba baa
02	(crush)	BANG!	(crush)	BANG!	(relax)
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01		I	never did it in high	SCHOOL	
02	i never did it in	HIGH		SCHOOL	

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- Each of these levels can be probed using three different questions:
  1. What did the speaker mean? 'We've turned down the invitation'
  2. What words did the speaker say? 'Sorry we can't come tomorrow'
  3. What were the soundshapes? *kangkum* or *khankum*
    - 'Can come' or 'Can't come'?

# METHODOLOGY

- Gap-fills

- even though it is for READING

1. \_\_\_\_\_ READING

2. | - - | | - - | - - | - - | READING

3. e | th | 't | i | f | READING



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- Dictations



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# THANKS!

## QUESTIONS?