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ABSTRACT

It is argued that slowed-down speech is a useful tool for teaching both listening comprehension and pronunciation to students of English as a second language. For listening comprehension, introduction of more, and longer pauses at grammatical boundaries allows more time for processing speech. The greater number of accented words and shorter grammatical constituents help the listeners to more easily relate the parts of the text to the whole. However, when using slowed-down speech for teaching listening, it is important to remember that slowed-down speech should always be followed by a repetition of the same utterance spoken at normal rates to avoid dependence on slow speech. Similarly, students can improve their own pronunciation by pausing more frequently and slowing down their articulation, particularly on stressed syllables. This not only helps overall rhythm and intelligibility, it can also be useful in mastering certain difficult consonants and consonant sequences. Examples of instructional materials used to train international teaching assistants are offered. Contains 8 references. (MSE)

Slowed-down speech: A teaching tool for listening/pronunciation

by Janet Anderson-Hsieh and Rebecca M. Dauer

Presented at TESOL '97, Orlando, Florida, March 14, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

When a non-native speaker is having difficulty understanding the target language, what is the first thing that he/she says? What is one of the phrases that you or I are sure to learn before we travel to a foreign country? "*Please slow down.*" Now when we ask someone to slow down, what are we really asking for? Most likely, we want more time to process the speech: we're not finished figuring out the beginning of the message when more and more keeps coming. We fall steadily behind and finally understand nothing at all. How can speech be slowed down effectively to promote the listener's comprehension?

Let me first say what is *not* a good way to slow down speech. Slowed down speech is *not* speaking one word at a time, stopping after each word, stressing every word, and pronouncing it very clearly. Although this method is sometimes used in the naive belief that speaking should resemble writing, it is not very helpful. So what is an effective way to slow down speech?

1. One way to slow down speech is simply to *pause more often* and *for a longer time* at *grammatical boundaries*. This may involve breaking a sentence up into more and thus shorter chunks, but it's still *fluent* speech which retains the grammatical structure and basic rhythm of speech. This is not the case in a word by word rendition. Words are smooth and connected, not distorted, overly precise citation forms. The overall *speaking rate* is lowered primarily by the addition of pauses or silent periods during which speech processing takes place.

2. Another way to slow down speech is to slow the actual *articulation rate* (syllables per second). In English, we slow the articulation rate by *lengthening the stressed syllables*, but not the unstressed syllables, which remain reduced. Therefore, the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables is increased. Unstressed syllables like *the, a,* or *at* are very short and are not changed in quality to /ðiː/, /eɪ/, or /æt/. Words are still connected to each other, and we don't change any sounds, such as releasing final /t/ to make it overcorrect.

In both cases, the *intonation changes* also: there are more intonation peaks and that the highs tend to be higher. Thus both the rhythm and the intonation are exaggerated.

3. Finally, speech can be *artificially slowed down* by mechanical means. What happens when a tape recorder is played at a slower speed? The speech is distorted because the pitch is lowered automatically, and all syllables (including unstressed ones) are lengthened the same amount, but the speech is still connected. Newer kinds of equipment can adjust the pitch, but these are often beyond the means of most ESL teachers.

With the increase in the use of authentic teaching materials and the wide availability of tapes and videos, we forget that slowed down speech can be a useful teaching tool, both in teaching listening comprehension and in teaching pronunciation.

SLOWED-DOWN SPEECH IN TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Background

Slowing down speech for facilitating listening comprehension is by no means a new idea. Caretakers slow down their speech when speaking to infants, and according to Hatch (1983), one of the characteristics of foreigner talk is a slower-than-normal rate of speaking.

There are three reasons why slowing down speech facilitates listening comprehension. The most obvious reasons are that the speaker's slower articulation makes it easier for the listener to identify words in the stream of speech and the more frequent pauses at grammatical boundaries allow additional time for the listener to process what has been said. A less obvious but perhaps more important reason is that the grammatically placed pauses allow the listener to more easily identify grammatical constituents and thus see the relationship of the parts of the sentence to the whole. When the discourse is run together without pauses, this is much more difficult to do.

It is important to note that fairly strong evidence exists from empirical research on the relationship between listening comprehension and speaking rate. Griffiths (1990, 1991) summarized the research that has been done both on native speakers and ESL learners. The research on native speakers shows that comprehension falls when faster rates of speech are used. The studies reported in the second language literature also show the same pattern, although differences of course exist between native and nonnative speakers in the the actual rates of comprehension. However, Griffiths points out that the second language studies were often not well controlled and the results therefore must be interpreted with some caution.

Griffiths (1990) conducted his own study on speaking rate and comprehension of ESL learners. The subjects for his study were 15 young adult Omani ESL learners with lower intermediate proficiency in English. In the experiment, they listened to semi-scientific texts that had been simplified both lexically and grammatically. They listened to the texts at three different rates: 150 words per minute, the approximate normal rate for native speakers; 200 words per minute, the fast rate; and 100 words per minute, the slow rate. After listening to each passage, the listeners answered comprehension questions. It was found that comprehension was poorest at the fastest rate and significantly better at the slowest rate. No significant differences were found between the normal and slow rates, suggesting that a rate somewere between 100 and 150 words per minute is the optimal rate for the comprehension of native speech by low intermediate Omani ESL learners Thus, Griffiths' study supported the notion that speaking rate is an important factor in listening comprehension.

I came to appreciate the use of slowed-down speech on a personal level when I was studying Japanese. I used a textbook and cassette tapes entitled *Japanese in Three Months* (Breen, 1987). All the listening exercises were recorded at both normal and slow rates, the slow rate being thirty to fifty percent slower than the normal rate. At the slower rate, I was able to identify words and grammatical boundaries more easily, and I found that I could remember the sentences more easily when trying to repeat them. For me, the slower rate eliminated a great deal of the frustration in trying to understand and speak Japanese. Yet I appreciated having the chance

to listen again to the exercises at a faster rate, because I wanted to become accustomed to the normal rate of speech used by Japanese speakers in normal conversations.

I feel that a need exists for more consideration of speaking rate in ESL listening materials. Although most elementary textbooks are recorded at slower rates than are advanced ESL texts, the speech is often slowed down in an unnatural way, without the elisions, contractions, and reductions that accompany natural speech. And the texts do not provide faster samples of speech so that the learners can begin to become accustomed to normal rates of speaking. Also, an examination of advanced ESL textbooks reveals that speaking rate is not manipulated to the learners' advantage either, although even advanced students can have difficulty understanding normal to fast rates of speaking and can benefit from rate-manipulated materials.

Rate-manipulated materials for teaching ESL listening

I now want to share with you an approach to improving listening comprehension through speaking rate manipulation that I have experimented with in an advanced ESL course for International Teaching Assistants (ITA's). I used two types of materials: a short text and a set of questions.

Short text. The short text is a 104 word summary of an article on heart disease and diet. Using a stop-watch, I recorded the text at two different speaking rates: a "slow" rate of 122 words per minute and a "fast" rate of 176 words per minute. The fast version of the text had six pauses and twenty-two accented or "focus" words while the slow version contained eighteen pauses and thirty-two accented words. Further, in the fast version, pauses occurred only at sentence boundaries, while in the slow version, pauses were inserted within sentences at clause and phrase boundaries. In addition, in the slow version, the pauses were somewhat longer. However, it is important to note that in the slow version, I spoke naturally, maintaining linking at word boundaries and vowel reduction in function words and unstressed syllables. The texts for the fast and slow versions of the passage are presented below. Pauses are indicated with two pound signs (##). Focus words--words that are intonationally prominent--appear in **boldface**.

Text[1] for fast version (176 wpm)

Research studies have shown that **frequent** consumption of **fish**, especially **fatty** fish, is **associated** with a lower incidence of coronary **artery** disease. ## The substance **responsible** for this effect is polyunsaturated fatty acids known as Omega-**threes**. ## They prevent **platelets** in the blood from sticking **together** and reduce **inflammatory** processes in blood **vessels** resulting in less plaque **buildup** and narrowing of the arteries in the **heart**. ## **Research** suggests ## that eating **fish** two to three times a **week** is sufficient for lowering the risk of coronary **artery** disease. ## The use of fish oil **supplements**, however, is **not** recommended ## due to the **possibility** of unfavorable **side** effects.

[1] Text adapted from "Fish Oil Capsules versus Fish," *University of California Wellness Letter*, 10:9, 1994, p. 4.

Text for Slow Version (122 wpm)

Research studies have shown that **frequent** consumption of **fish**, ## especially **fatty** fish, ## is **associated** with a **lower** incidence of coronary **artery** disease. ## The substance **responsible** for this effect ## is **poly**unsaturated **fatty** acids ## **known** as Omega-**threes**. ## **They** prevent **platelets** in the blood ## from **sticking** together ## and reduce **inflammatory** processes in blood **vessels** ## **resulting** ## in less plaque **buildup** and narrowing of the arteries in the **heart**. ## **Research** suggests ## that eating **fish** two to three times a **week** ## is **sufficient** for lowering the risk of coronary **artery** disease. ## The use of fish oil **supplements**, ## **however**, ## is **not** recommended ## **due** to the **possibility** ## of unfavorable **side** effects.

When I played both versions of the text to my class of ITA's (I played the fast version first) I discovered that comprehension at the fast rate was very poor. The students understood only what the topic was. But when I played the slow version, the students were able to recall about 50% of the important details in the passage. This improved comprehension was probably due to shorter grammatical constituents resulting from more frequent pauses at grammatical boundaries and more accented words. These factors combined with a somewhat slower rate of articulation made the passage easier to process and therefore easier to understand and remember. Based on my experience using these passages with ITA's, I would recommend the following steps in presenting such passages to students:

1. Play the fast version and ask the students to stretch their comprehension by trying to understand as much as they can. Check for comprehension.
2. Play the slower version to enhance the students' comprehension. Check for comprehension again.
3. Provide a text of the tape with the location of pauses and accents indicated, as in the texts above, and ask the students to listen to both versions of the tape once again. Mention the fact that it is the key words that are accented and that accented words are usually more prominent intonationally than are the other words. Also discuss any linking and connected speech simplifications that occur, particularly in the fast version of the text.
4. Ask the students to put away the text and listen to the fast version again. The purpose of this step is to avoid dependence on slow speech.
5. An optional fifth step, especially useful when teaching ITA's, or preparing any students for giving oral presentations, is to discuss how the students can make their own speech more comprehensible by following the same principles of pausing at grammatical boundaries and making the key word in each thought group more prominent intonationally. I also inform my students that research has shown that native speakers understand nonnative speakers better when they slow down (Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988).

Questions in fast, casual speech. The second set of materials I developed was motivated by the ITA's difficulties in understanding questions spoken in the fast, casual style of the North American undergraduate students in their classes. They have difficulty understanding this style of speech not only because it is faster, but also because fast speech contains more simplifications,

more deleted syllables, and more assimilation than does speech produced at normal rates (Dalby, 1986). Therefore, when teaching the comprehension of fast, casual speech, it is important to provide students with practice in listening to and identifying simplifications. (A description of the various types of simplifications found in fast casual speech with examples can be found in Hieke [1987] and Dauer [1993]).

I made up some hypothetical questions that typical undergraduates in the ITA's classes might ask, and I presented them to the ITA's in both a fast, casual style and a more careful, formal style. Some examples of these sentences, with the simplifications indicated below them, are presented below.

a. *When are we going to have the next quiz?*
/wɛnəˑwigənəhævðənɛkskwɪz/ (Fast casual style)
/wɛn ɑr wi goɪŋ tu hæv ðə nɛkst kwɪz/ (Slow careful style)

b. *What did you say the second step was?*
/wʌdʒəseɪðəsɛkn̩stɛpwəz/ (Fast casual style)
/wʌt dɪd yu seɪ ðə sɛkənd stɛp wʌz/ (Slow careful style)

I used the following steps to present the sentences to the students:

1. I dictated each utterance using a fast casual speech style replete with elisions and simplifications while the students attempted to transcribe the utterance in standard orthography. I then checked to see whether the students were able to correctly identify all of the words in the utterance.
2. I dictated the utterance again using a slower, more careful pronunciation. I then checked to see how much missing information the students were able to fill in.
3. I provided a text of each utterance with the elisions and simplifications that occurred in the fast, casual version indicated below the utterance as in the examples above. I then pronounced the simplifications in a slow exaggerated style to make them more perceptually accessible. I answered questions and we discussed the simplifications.
4. I read the fast version of the sentences again so that the students would become accustomed to hearing the simplifications at faster rates of speaking.

The students found the exercises helpful, and based on my experience, I strongly recommend rate manipulated material for teaching ESL listening comprehension at all levels of ESL proficiency, advanced as well as elementary and intermediate.

SLOWED-DOWN SPEECH IN TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

How can slowed-down speech be used in helping students to improve their pronunciation? I'd like to begin with the most general teaching suggestions, ones that can be used in any class, and work down to more specific techniques for speaking/pronunciation classes.

1. Improving overall rhythm & intelligibility through pausing.

The single most important thing a non-native speaker at any level can do to improve intelligibility is to slow down. This is easy to prove by simply recording a student, playing the recording back, and asking what he/she needs to do. Advanced students especially will comment right away that they speak too fast. One can demonstrate the importance of pausing by reading any long sentence without pausing. Or put on the board a sentence like "*I told the man that the boss met the story*" to discuss.

However, saying "speak more slowly" is not enough. The teacher needs to tell the student exactly what to do. The first and easiest piece of advice is to *pause at the end of each grammatical unit, pause more frequently, pause for a longer time,* and *allow there to be silence during the pause* (that is, don't fill the pauses with *and* or hesitation noises).

One can simply ask a student to *repeat what he/she just said with longer pauses*, and again with still longer ones. It may take three or four tries. Tell them to pause twice as long as they think they should. The rest of the class will easily verify that their speech sounds more comprehensible.

With any written text, ask students where they could pause (ask where else it's possible to pause if you're a slow speaker). Have them *mark in where they think they should pause* and then practice reading aloud (tape record if possible). It's amazing how much better even a relatively low level speaker will sound after having planned where to pause. Usually they will know where to pause, but you can review this: pause at the ends of phrases and clauses, at punctuation marks, and before conjunctions such as *but, and, although, which, that.*

The technique of *shadowing a text* (speaking at the same time as a model--the teacher or a recording) can also be useful. Students will discover that they jump ahead and fail to pause long enough. A common problem is that they tend to try to say too much together and then suddenly are forced to pause at the wrong place.

In free speech, students need to *focus on speaking in shorter, complete* units. Tell them to pause completely at the end of each clause. Shorten sentences: think subject-verb-object pause. Have no more than two ideas per sentence. Be direct. This is especially helpful for Chinese graduate students.

Advanced students can be told to try to lengthen syllables before pausing, even if they don't actually pause completely in the middle of a sentence.

Why does just pausing more make such a difference? Pausing reflects the grammatical structure and thus makes speech easier for the listener to parse. Pauses also give the listener time

to make alternative hypotheses about what unclear words might be. Another result is that students will tend to drop fewer final consonants: consonant clusters tend to be at the ends of nouns and verbs, and these will often end up before pauses. Alternatively, one can ask a student to repeat what they just said and *focus on pronouncing/not dropping all the final consonants.* In order to do this, they find that they must slow down.

2. Maximize the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables.

At the next higher level, students need to try to make a bigger difference between stressed and unstressed syllables. This is more difficult to teach because it requires defining stress, vowel reduction, content words, and function words. It's also more peculiar to English: pausing appropriately is important in all languages. A common problem for non-native speakers is to pronounce stressed syllables too short and cut off. They need to be told to *lengthen or stretch out stressed syllables* and one syllable content words. Have them focus on *emphasizing the stressed syllables and all the important nouns, verbs,* and *adjectives.* If they are in a pronunciation class, make sure they *change the quality of the unstressed vowels* in function words--/ə/ and /ɪ/ are inherently short.

Practicing reading aloud a text in which they have marked the stress is very helpful. They can also try tapping or nodding their head to important words. Practice weak forms in phrases like *to two* /tə 'tu/, *for four* /fɚ 'fɔr/, *that that* /ðɪt 'ðæt/, *had had* /həd 'hæd/ very slowly at first to make sure they can make the difference in quality.

3. Linking

One of the most common errors after talking too fast is sounding choppy and dropping final consonants. Most students are not aware that final consonants need to be linked to following words. They need to be told to *make the final consonant begin the next word* when it begins with a vowel. Linking is very easy to teach to students at any level. In this case, students need to slow speech down even more than normal and then practice to bring it back to a normal speed. People forget that speaking is a muscular activity. If we're learning how to play tennis or golf or piano, we expect to practice in slow motion first. This allows us to become aware of the muscles involved and to try to gain control over them.

pick it up = pi ki dup
leave it alone = lea vi ta lone
in an hour = i na nour
was always early = wa zalway zearly

Linking also can break up consonant clusters and thus make them easier to pronounce. Students also need to link consonants smoothly to following /w/ and /y/.

fax it = fack sit
called her up = call der rup
love you = luv view
first of all = firs ta vall
watched him = watch dim
red wedding dress = re dwedding dress

When demonstrating, the teacher needs to focus on lengthening each syllable without changing the quality of the consonants and vowels. For example, don't aspirate the /k/ or /t/ (which really sounds more like /d/). This requires some introspection and practice. Try to keep the sounds flowing.

Respelling the words phonetically often helps. If students can't do it right off or it's a long phrase, try *backward buildup*. The student repeats the phrase after the teacher beginning with the last syllable.

He opened his eyes. = /ˈzaɪz, dɪ ˈzaɪz, pɪn dɪ ˈzaɪz, ˈyoʊ pɪn dɪ ˈzaɪz, hi ˈyoʊ pɪn dɪ ˈzaɪz/

4. Coarticulating sequences of consonants

Another very common error is the inability to pronounce two or more consonants in a row either within or across word boundaries. This is another area where using super slowed-down speech can help enormously without the need for any explicit articulatory instruction. Many intermediate and advanced learners can in fact pronounce each consonant separately at least in some contexts, but can't put them together because such sequences are not permitted in their native language.

Just like in linking final consonants to initial vowels of the next word, students need to be explicitly taught *to join consonants together smoothly* within phrases. The problem is that they do not anticipate the following consonant soon enough; that is they don't coarticulate. They either release or drop the final consonant.

If the consonants are the same, they just lengthen them.

a hard‿day	*develop‿problems*
this‿story	*both‿things*

With different consonants, they need to try to *hold on to one consonant and begin the next one before they have released the first one*. Start very slowly and then build up to normal speed. To feel it more, *do it silently*.

take‿time	*public‿policy*
a good‿point	*a card‿game*

Or they can think of *saying them at the same time*.

keep‿talking = kee ptalking

For difficult consonants, *isolate the consonants* and practice sliding between them very slowly first. Then go to the phrases.

/vð/	*live there*	/vðz/	*lives there*
/tʃt/	*watch television*	/ʃð/	*wish this*
/tʃtʃ/	*which children*	/dʒdʒ/	*orange juice*

The same technique can be used to practice difficult consonant clusters within words.

/tʃt/	*watched*	/ʃt/	*washed*
/ks/	*likes, tax*	/sks/	*desks, tasks*

5. Undoing excessive coarticulation

Slowing down and practicing a word silently is also good for individual consonants or vowels which students have partial control over (they can pronounce them in some contexts but not others). In this case, the problem is the opposite: the student is coarticulating or anticipating too much and blending the two sounds together too much. Typically, this involves pronouncing a consonant and following vowel with the same lip rounding. In very slow speech, they need to *begin thinking of one vowel* as they say the word and then change to the other after they've already started to pronounce the consonant.

/s - ʃ/	*see, see...sue*	*shoe, shoe...she*
/v - w/	*'V','V'...vile*	*while, while...we*
/l - r/	*bleed, bleed...blue*	*brew, brew...breed*

6. Pronouncing /r, l/ after consonants or final nasals /m, n, ŋ/

We may perceive /r/ or /l/ to be dropped when really the student is saying it, but it's too short. Or the difference between /r/ and /l/ might be unclear because they are too short. This problem might be improved significantly simply by *lengthening the sound: frright, fllight,* compared to *fight.*

Any cluster with /r/ can be *first pronounced as the vowel /ə˞/* and then speeded up. This helps students to avoid tapping or trilling the /r/ as well as to make sure it is long enough.

grow = /gə˞ oʊ/	*glow* = /gl oʊ/
three = /θə˞ ri/	*through* = /θə˞ ru/

Students can be told to think of words like these as *consisting of two syllables* (two of their syllables). Start very slowly and then build up to normal speed retaining the feeling.

man = /mæ nn/ or /mæ ən/	*time* = /taɪ m/

Sequences of <r+l> are especially difficult and really need to be slowed down and thought of as two (or more syllables).

girl = /gə˞ əl/	*world* = /wə˞ əld/	*squirrel* = /skwə˞ əl/ or /s kwə˞ əl/

7. Pronouncing final voiced consonants

In struggling to pronounce final voiced consonants in English, students often make the mistake of exaggerating them. Instead, they should *lengthen the vowel*, not the final voiced consonant, and allow the *final consonant to be voiceless.* Again they can think of the word taking up the time of two syllables. If linked to a following vowel, the voicing is easy to achieve.

bag = /bæː k/	*change* = /tʃeɪn tʃ/

The "short vowels" /ɪ, ɛ, ʊ/ can be lengthened by making them descending *diphthongs.* This helps to prevent them from changing into /i, eɪ, u/.

big = /bɪəg/	*beg* = /bɛəg/

Simply by slowing down, many pronunciation problems of intermediate and advanced students, those that are due to language structure and misconceptions about the relationship between the written and spoken language, can be dealt with easily by any teacher without having to go into detailed articulatory training.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have tried to show that slowed-down speech is a useful tool for teaching both listening comprehension and pronunciation. For listening comprehension, the introduction of more and longer pauses at grammatical boundaries allows more time for processing speech and the greater number of accented words and shorter grammatical constituents help the listeners to more easily relate the parts of the text to the whole. However, when using slowed down speech for teaching listening, it is important to remember that slowed-down speech should always be followed by a repetition of the same utterances spoken at normal rates to avoid dependence on slow speech. Similarly, students can improve their own pronunciation by pausing more frequently and slowing down their articulation, particularly on stressed syllables. This not only helps their overall rhythm and intelligibility, but also can be useful in helping them to master certain difficult consonants and consonant sequences.

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