

## **CONNECTED SPEECH MODIFICATION AMONG INDONESIAN LISTENERS OF ENGLISH AND THE TEACHING**

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### **Abstract**

In spoken English, sound adjustments called connected speech modification (or post lexical processes), such as linking, palatalization, and deletion commonly occur in the stream of speech across word boundaries. The stretch of modified spoken English may pose challenges among the listeners to comprehend the message. This research exploration rendered some issues to be attended that first, listening comprehension to English utterances especially when spoken by a native speaker of English within a less formal speech style can pose challenges among Indonesian listeners of English. One among other attributes to the problem can be traced back to how post lexical speech modification is linguistically different from the system in Bahasa Indonesia. Second, the modification may obstruct the listening strategies employed by Indonesian listeners of English who operate on their syllable-timed system. This data of this descriptive qualitative research were taken from the years of long teaching and learning experiences of the writer. The discussion was presented within the context of related literatures to show that all discussions and findings were ontologically following the conceptual framework of English phonetics and phonology constructs.

**Keywords:** connected speech modification, listening comprehension, spoken English

### **INTRODUCTION**

It has been widely understood that listening has become one of the stumbling blocks in the process of second/foreign language acquisition among Indonesian learners of English. Students find listening difficult. Results of over 50.000 EPT™ test takers at

LIA (where the writer works) indicate that listening proves to be the most challenging part of the 3 areas tested (Listening, Grammar, and Reading). This fact is more attested among those scoring 450 to 500 (on the scale of 670). It is suspected that one of the possible causes of problems with listening is these post-lexical modifications in the speech or in the recording.

In real life, there are many situations where people are listening. In this situation, the essential point is that they need to be able to understand what people are saying to function satisfactorily in any situations they might encounter in real life. This might be challenging, especially when listening to a foreign language.

Potential problems in learning to listen to spoken English in real life listening situations can be accountable to lacking control over the speed at which speakers speak (rate of delivery), not being able to get things repeated (real time), listener's limited vocabulary, and failures to recognize discourse markers of English.

Regarding the rate of speed of delivery, listeners might not be familiar with several sound modifications of English; those which are not found or different from those in Bahasa Indonesia (L1). Such phenomena of English phonology as clustering, reduced forms, stress, rhythm, and intonation (prosodic issues) and shortness may not be found or found different in the two languages.

In spoken English, especially North American English (NAE), sound adjustments or modifications, such as linking, vowel reduction, deletion, palatalization, alveolar flapping, glottalization, intrusive /r/, and consonant cluster simplification, commonly occur in the stream of speech. Celce-Murcia, Marianne; Brinton, Donna M.; Goodwin (2013) call these phenomena "adjustments in connected speech." Also, some phonologists call them "postlexical processes." In order to avoid unnecessary confusion of the term, this paper will adopt the term "connected speech modification" to refer to sound adjustments or modifications in connected speech.

The focus of this article is exclusively on linking, alveolar flapping, palatalization, and /h/ deletion across word boundaries; all of which occur very frequently in the stream of

natural English speech among the native speakers of English, thus suprasegmental in nature.

This article sees that connected speech modification is one of the problems among the Indonesian listeners of English in comprehending spoken English. It will also elaborate the probable problem areas. Suggestions for teaching to help solve the problems are to be provided at the end of this article.

## **METHOD**

This research was descriptive qualitative. It provides a detailed and accurate description of a phonological phenomenon particularly pertaining to how phonological aspects may interfere listening comprehension among Indonesian learners of English. Some phonological accounts regarding possible problem attributes were provided to explore detailed sources of auditory text comprehension. Data were provided from the years of long teaching and learning experiences of the writer.

The data was selected based on its constant recurrence in the learning and teaching experiences of the writer. Each phonological theme discussed were defined, explained, and supported by accountable quotes and examples. While qualitative way of analysis was primarily, visual tools like tables and figures were presented to present data and summarize findings. The discussion was presented within the context of related literatures to show that all discussions and findings were ontologically following the conceptual framework of English phonetics and phonology constructs.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND DISCUSSION**

Phonology as a study of the sound system of language is useful in understanding how speech works. One area of study of phonology is the phenomenon of sound modification in speech. This modification can be subtle and will affect phonological suprasegmental phonological patterns and may affect speech comprehension.

Suprasegmental features, sometimes called prosodic features, involve the phenomena that extend over more than one sound segment (Nabila Zuhairya et al.) whereas segmental features refer to specific phonetic characteristics of individual sound segments. Celce-Murcia et al. (2013) also include word

stress, sentence stress, rhythm and adjustments in connected speech along with prominence and intonation (35).

Considering that suprasegmental features deal with sound units which transcend the segmental level, it is quite understandable that suprasegmental features and connected speech modification are closely related to each other (Zarifi and Sayyadi (2015). Before closely examining each element of connected speech modification, we need to look into some factors which greatly involve the production of connected speech modification, namely, stress and syllable structure of English, issues that are found different in English and Bahasa Indonesia as in the stress-time nature of English and syllable-timed of Bahasa Indonesia.

Liu and Takeda (2024) noted that a stress-timed language is one of the salient characteristics of the suprasegmental aspects of the English sound system. Celce-Murcia et.al. states:

Word and sentence stress combine to create the rhythm of an English utterance- that is, the regular, patterned beat of stress and unstressed syllable and pauses. This rhythm is similar to the pattern of a musical phrase. Just as in music, English moves in regular, rhythmic beats from stress to stress – no matter how many unstressed syllables fall in between. This stress-timed nature of English means that the length of an utterance depends not on the number of syllables (as it would in a syllable-timed language like Spanish and Japanese) but rather on the number of stresses.

Unlike the syllable-timed nature of Bahasa Indonesia, in which the length of an utterance depends on the number of syllables, English creates its typical rhythmic patterns by placing weight only on stressed syllables while at the same time it reduces the unstressed syllables. In sentences of English, these stressed syllables are generally content words in the utterance, and the unstressed syllables are usually function words. As exemplified by Celce-Murcia et al. (2013), the two utterances in the following instances take roughly equivalent length of time in the pronunciation:

Cats chase mice.  
The cats could have been chasing the mice. (152)

C1C2V_	C1C2V_
C1C2C3V_	NA

As for the syllable final cases are as follows.

**Table 2: Syllable final phonotactic rules**

English	English words	Bahasa Indonesia	BI words
__VC1	<on>	VC1	<om> (uncle)
__VC1C2	<act>	NA	NA
__VC1C2C3	<carts>	NA	NA
__VC1C2C3 C4	<attempts>	NA	NA

The two tables illustrate the different phonotactic systems of the two languages. This may also be responsible for problems with listening. To make it worse, when two words are spoken at a certain speed rate, they will be combined through such process as resyllabification, digeminization, or many other assimilation processes of English, thus much shorter in pronunciation and sometimes the word boundary is obstructed and not exist anymore. This is indeed a problem when the listeners’ “phonological grammars” are not within the same wavelength of English. In other words, what the listeners know (thus interlanguage grammars) not what the speakers know (native speakers’ grammars).

It should also be getting more complicated that English syllable structure even allows consonant clustering in which two or more consonants occur in syllable-initial or syllable-final position as in CCCVCCCC at the maximum as in *strength* when pronounced as /strɛŋθ/ and some word-final clusters are normally reduced in pronunciation. Cel-Murcia et.al. exemplifies as follows

**Table 3: Examples of word-final cluster reduction in speech**

Origin	When in speech
Tests	[tess]
Scrims	[srɪms]
Prints	[prɪns]
Tourists	[tʊrɪss]

The complex CV structure of word-final clusters are simplified to the level that it eases up pronunciation. This case will get more complicated when these words are linked with other words in pronunciation. This will pose a serious challenge for learners of English who are not yet richly exposed to this phonological process of English.

The instances above confirm that this complexity of English syllable structure naturally causes consonant cluster simplification to make the pronunciation easier, which leads to the occurrence of connected speech modification such as linking across word boundaries and consonant deletion. For example, *kind of* [kaindəv] or even [kainəv] deleting the consonant /d/ and reducing the sound /ɔ/ the central sound (schwa) [ə]. This is causing resyllabification, reduction, deletion, and linking; and, for <last night>, it is pronounced [lasnait] with consonant deletion. Of course, these phenomena are not found common in Bahasa Indonesia. And again, this may be the source of problems among Indonesian listeners of English.

As for the element of connected speech modification Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) list at least five categories: linking, assimilation, dissimilation, deletion and epenthesis (158-165), each of which carries sub elements. Let us explore some of the modification processes as follows.

**Linking**

In connected speech, words within an utterance often blend together by connecting the final sound of one word to the initial sound of the next (Hadiyatulloh et al., 2024)as in the following example:

Can I have\_an\_orange?’ or ‘my daughters\_Samand\_Amy’.

This phenomenon is called *linking*, or *liaison*. In fact, linking can be classified into four types: consonants to vowels; consonants to consonants; identical consonants; and vowels to vowels.

Linking consonants to vowels occurs when a word that ends with a single consonant is followed by a word that begins with a vowel, the final consonant is often produced intervocalically as if it belonged to both syllables as exemplified below (see examples in Celce-Murcia).

dog eat dog      black and gray      McLean Avenue  
Macintosh apple

When a word ending in a consonant cluster is followed by a word that begins with a vowel, the final consonant of the cluster is often pronounced as part of the following syllable. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as *resyllabification* as exemplified below (more examples are provided in Celce-Murcia, et.al).

lef/t arm      wep/t over      fin/d out      push/ed up

Linking consonants to consonants occurs when a word that ends with a stop consonant is followed by a word that begins with a consonant. The stop consonant is usually not released, as can be seen in the examples below :

stop trying      pet croccodile      big boy      bad judge      let  
down

Linking identical consonants occurs when the consonant that ends one word is identical to the consonant that begins the next word, the two consonants are pronounced as one long consonant as exemplified below.

stop pushing      bad dog      big gap      less serious  
quick cure

Linking vowels to vowels occurs when a word ends in a vowel and the next word begins with another vowel, a short /y/



after front vowels or a short /w/ after back vowels is normally added (see more examples in Celce-Murcia).

be <sup>y</sup>able    say <sup>y</sup>it    my <sup>y</sup>own    toy <sup>y</sup>airplane    blue <sup>w</sup>ink  
no <sup>w</sup>art    how <sup>w</sup>is it

### **Alveolar Flapping**

Alveolar flapping, (or tapping) [ɾ] is a positional variant of /t/ and /d/ especially in North American English (NAE) (Scott and Cutler, 1982). The phonological rule of alveolar flapping is as follows (Darwanto, 2003)

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{c} /t/ \\ /d/ \end{array} \right\} \rightarrow [ɾ] / V \text{---} V | \text{-stress}$$

The example of this phonological process is as follows:

- after vowel □ butter, atom, Adam

### **Palatalization**

Halle (2005) noted that palatalization is the movement of the place of articulation toward the palate either from the alveolar ridge or from the velum. This process is usually triggered by a following [j] or front vowel [i], [e].

The most common types of palatalization in connected speech in English occur when alveolar stops or fricatives appear before palatal glide /y/. The examples are as follows ((Celce-Murcia, Marianne; Brinton, Donna M.; Goodwin, 1996)).

/s/ + /y/ → /ʃ/ (e.g., this year)  
/z/ + /y/ → /ʒ/ (e.g., please yourself)  
/t/ + /y/ → /tʃ/ (e.g., not yet)  
/d/ + /y/ → /dʒ/ (e.g., would you)

### **/h/ Deletion**

Deletion is a phonological process whereby “sounds disappear or are not clearly articulated in certain contexts” (Celce-Murcia, Marianne; Brinton, Donna M.; Goodwin, 1996 ).

In pronouns and auxiliaries which begin with *h*, such as *he*, *him*, *her*, *have*, and *had*, the /h/ sound can be deleted and the remaining sound links to the final phone of the preceding word in fast speech as in (see more examples in Celce-Murcia, Appendix 10: 389-394):

I <u>saw</u> <u>him</u> yesterday.	Did you <u>ask</u> <u>her</u> ?
/h/ □ ∅/	h/ □ ∅

In the examples above, the pronouns *him* and *her* are not stressed, thus, the /h/ deletion occurs. However, indeed, this phenomenon normally occurs when less degree of speech formality accounts.

### **Cases among Indonesian Learners of English**

Pronunciation has not received a lot of attention in the teaching and learning process in Indonesia. Not many teaching and learning materials incorporate pronunciation teaching. Very little, if any, phonological aspect is included.

This is probably because the language learning approach that the curriculum employs does not suggest pronunciation as important. Communicative Language Teaching approach seems not to provide enough room for the phonological aspects of language acquisition because this theory holds that fluency is more important than accuracy. Fluency is considered obligatory while accuracy is optional. It is suggested to address pronunciation only if the utterance is unintelligible or brings communication to a halt. Pronunciation deals with accuracy, and is considered optional and unimportant.

Even though the phonological aspect is only of minimum focus of attention in the curriculum, it does not mean that the students face only minor pronunciation problems in their study of English. We teachers in fact can easily spot (even among peer teachers themselves) that students exhibit a number of pronunciation problems regardless of their levels of language competence: either basic, intermediate, or advanced. Some pronunciation problems even seem to follow the students straight through the three different levels.

There are various types of pronunciation errors that teachers can trace from the errors made. One type of error that

is common can be attributed to the interlingual phonemic differences between Bahasa Indonesia (BI) and English. The interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/<sup>1</sup>, for instance, it usually creates pronunciation problems because BI does not have those sounds in its phonemic inventory. As a result, a word like <three> is often pronounced as either [sri] or [tri]; while <though> is usually pronounced as [do].

Distributional problems are also observable. These problems exist because of the dissimilarity of the distributional systems of the two languages. Phonemically, BI and English share almost all the consonant phonemes. However, they differ in their distribution. For instance, both English and BI have the sibilants /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. Indonesian speakers shall not have problems pronouncing these two sounds as syllable onsets. Nevertheless, these sounds create problems when they occur in syllable codas. For instance, <cash> is pronounced as [kɛs], and <george> becomes [dʒɔʃ], [dʒɔ] or [dʒɔs] (<George Bush> is pronounced as [dʒɔs bus]). However, these kinds of errors are easily addressed since they are easily spotted and that its characteristic is phonemic. Something phonemic is more marked than those which are phonetic and prosodic, let alone those assimilative when in normal speech.

The phonetic nature of English also seems to create errors. Aspiration, for instance, plays an important role in English but receives little attention by Indonesian speakers of English. Students do not notice that /p/ in <pin> that a native speaker produces is different from theirs. The puff of air following the sound is hardly noticed. As a result, BI speakers of English normally pronounce it as [pɪn], instead of [p<sup>h</sup>ɪn]. This kind of error should be the most widely spotted among the English speakers of Indonesians. This is because teachers might not have done sufficient measures to help students acquire these phonological aspects, for it is considered only accentual thus considered extremely not important, not affecting comprehension. Let alone when the debate over which accent actually you are following, British or American, is intensifying. And, since the answer is not only linguistic but also social, these phonetic natures of English has been left

unattended. It is not merely talking about the grammar or phonological aspect of speaking but also which accent you like better, even which nation you prefer. It then suffices to say that teaching pronunciation should receive more attention thus more portion especially when sound modifications are concerned. Teaching them to the students will help them notice the case and be familiar with the sound adjustment of English in speech, especially when spoken at a higher pace.

## CONCLUSION

Listening to English utterances especially when spoken by a native speaker of English within a less formal speech style can pose challenges among Indonesian listeners of English. One among other attributes to the problem can be traced back to how post lexical speech modification is linguistically different from the system in Bahasa Indonesia. Second, the modification may obstruct the listening strategies employed by Indonesian listeners of English who operate on their syllable-timed system.

This area of pronunciation has rarely been attended. The phonological process of English such as reduction in speech, deletion, resyllabification and others require more attention thus more time allotment as well in the teaching of English. This is to help learners get familiar with the phonological processes that in turn will help them listen to stretches of English utterances in a better manner.

Pronunciation teaching can be carried out in two ways. First, it can simply be incorporated into other teaching skills such as when teaching speaking, reading (esp. when for speaking), and even into conversational events done by teachers and students. Second, pronunciation can be separately detached from the teaching of other skills as in an English-for-special-purposes program. This is especially important when preparing students for such professions as TV/Radio announcers, news anchors, MCs, interpreters, liaison officers, voice-over persons, and other professions that require more meticulous pronunciation skills or that pronunciation accuracy matters. Still within the framework of the latter, pronunciation can even be taught to students of general English. This is highly accounted for when the problems areas

are specified into those that typically ruin the communicability and even the beauty of the language. The first talks about whether imprecise pronunciation will destroy meaning. For instance, saying “sheet” with the vowel [ɪ] instead of [i] will create problems in communication. Note that there are common mispronunciation areas among Indonesian speakers of English and they need to be taught and even drilled.

As for speech modifications, the second, the beauty of English one amongst others lies on the employment of native speakers’ rules of pronunciation such as aspiration, flapping, glottalization, palatalization, dark /l/, light /h/, r-initial and r-final, and many others. These processes when practiced in pronunciation will help one’s pronunciation sound more rhythmic and on-beats, more melodious. This is also the characteristics of native speakers’ speech.

In fact, there is also the third area. However, this area does not directly deal with rules of pronunciation per se but more about misconception of pronouncing words that they think they have got familiar with. It has been widely proven that because the students feel that the words are already their or no longer English as a result of word absorption (borrowed) from English, then they would pronounce the words at pleasure, not following the rules of English. They are words adopted or borrowed from the English language as follows:

*Procedures, circle, vitamin, syrup, balloon, cartoon, carton, technique, America, Asia, , analysis, basic instinct, develop, department, developer, , examiner, April, apple, favorite, target, audience, management, vital, executive, a duplicate, to duplicate, generic, general, television, laboratory, control, problem, different, mathematic, address, psychology, hypotheses, version, duties, buried, hurricane, climate, climbing, modules, awesome, principles, specific, systematic, strategic, perfect, region national, karaoke, karate, material, commitment, vocal, a record, to record, competitor, procedures, etc.etc.*

Try to check even among those whose TOEFL scores are within the top achievers. Chances are that they will still mispronounce those word entries. It is highly possible that the learners will make these mistakes when pronouncing those

words. This is because they may take it for granted that the pronunciation is just the same as that of the BI version. And it is also highly probable that when one mispronounces the words, they will also mishear them (what they pronounce is what they think they hear).

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