

Teaching Weak Forms

T

HE USE OF THE WEAK FORM IS A COMMON FEATURE OF SPOKEN ENGLISH, however, in my teaching experience I've found that few Chinese students actually use it when speaking English. One possible reason could be that they have never been taught weak forms, therefore, they don't have any idea what the weak form is and they do not use it in their speech. There are at least three reasons why teachers do not teach weak forms. First, teachers themselves don't know the weak forms very well. Second, even if they have some knowledge of weak forms, they don't know how to teach them. After all, it's easier to teach individual sounds, such as vowels and consonants, than weak forms. Although there are many materials for teaching segmentals, materials for teaching weak forms are not readily available. Third, teachers' prejudices may prevent them from teaching weak forms. They may hold the view that weak forms are not as important as phonemes, so they don't want to take the trouble to teach them.

Whatever the reason, the failure to teach weak forms makes it difficult for Chinese students to speak English comprehensibly and to comprehend the speech of native and other fluent speakers of English. This article aims to build teachers' awareness of the importance of teaching weak forms and suggests some practical ways to do so, regardless of what native language students speak.

What is the weak form?

English is a stress-timed language, which means that stressed syllables are equal in timing. In order to fit our words into this pattern, we tend to "squash" or compress other syllables or words occurring between stresses, in order to keep up with the more or less regular rhythm (Mayers 1981:422). Therefore, compressing or "weakening" some sounds is necessary to keep the rhythm of English.

A weak form is the pronunciation of a word or syllable in an unstressed manner. Of course, the difference between the strong form (stressed) and the weak form (unstressed) of a word is not apparent in writing, but in speech these two variations in pronunciation can be drastically different. If spoken in isolation, the weak form of a word would probably be unintelligible.

The difference between the two forms can affect meaning. Here is an example to show how strong and weak forms of a single word (*that*) can change the entire meaning of a sentence:

- John thinks that man is evil. /ðət/
This version of the sentence, with the weak (unstressed) form of *that*, means "John thinks all humans are evil."
- John thinks that man is evil. /ðæt/
This version of the sentence, with the strong (stressed) form of *that*, means "John thinks a specific (male) individual is evil."

As indicated by this example, if a speaker unknowingly uses the strong form instead of the weak form, misunderstandings can occur.

Rationale for teaching weak forms

There are two good reasons why weak forms ought to be taught. First, teaching weak forms can help students improve their production of spoken English. Because of the influence of their first language, my Chinese students tend to pronounce every word very clearly. As a result, their speech always sounds

foreign, sometimes unintelligible, because enunciating each word in a sentence can disrupt the natural rhythm of spoken English. Second, not knowing the weak form may inhibit students' comprehension of the English spoken by fluent speakers. Therefore, acquiring weak forms is important not only for students' production of spoken English but also for their listening comprehension.

Introducing the concept of weak forms

It is a good idea to begin instruction of weak forms by raising students' awareness of the concept. Let them know that using weak forms is a common feature of natural English speech and does not represent a degenerate manner of speaking (Seymour 1969). If students know the rationale for using weak forms, then they will be motivated to learn them.

The teacher can have students listen to some sentences in which weak forms are used. For example, the weak form of *to* /tə/ is used in the following two sentences:

- He went to the library to read magazines.
- After the accident, she had to go to the hospital.

The teacher could first ask students to pronounce the word *to* in isolation in the strong form, then have them listen to these two sentences and draw their attention to the pronunciation of *to* in the weak form, comparing the different pronunciations. When the students perceive the difference, the teacher can introduce the notion of weak forms.

Before teaching some specific weak forms, the teacher needs to introduce their main phonological features. There are generally three ways in which the strong form is changed into the weak form.

1. A vowel is reduced to a schwa (the neutral vowel /ə/) in function words, such as *to*, *a*, *the*, *and*, and *of*. If the students are not familiar with the term of *function word*, the teacher can explain that function words are usually articles, conjunctions, and prepositions, as well as auxiliary verbs.
2. A final consonant is omitted from a function word, such as *and*.
3. An initial consonant is omitted from pronouns, such as *he*, *him*, *her*, and *them* (except when the pronoun occurs at the start of a sentence).

Example sentences should be given to illustrate each of these three ways for students to get a rough idea of weak forms.

After students have an initial understanding of the weak form, it's time for the teacher to organize some activities to help them master pronunciation of weak forms in English. An important guideline for teaching weak forms is that the teacher shouldn't give students a long list of weak forms of words and teach them all at once. A better technique is to teach the weak forms according to the grammatical category of function words. Generally speaking, there are six groups of function words that have weak forms: articles, pronouns, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbs. In the following two sections, teaching the weak form of the auxiliary verb *can* is presented as an example of one way to teach this important aspect of spoken English.

Presentation and controlled practice

First, the teacher writes three sentences on the blackboard:

1. Can you swim?
2. Yes, I can.
3. He can swim, too.

and says them out loud. Just like the awareness-raising activity mentioned above, the teacher focuses the students' attention on the pronunciation of *can* in these sentences, helping them perceive that the strong form /kæn/ is used in the first two sentences, while the weak form /kən/ is used in the third sentence. In the initial or final position of a sentence, the strong form of function words will usually be used even if it is unstressed. If students are familiar with the phonetic symbols, the teacher can write the two different phonetic transcriptions next to each sentence, then read them aloud, having students listen to the two forms in isolation. The teacher can check whether they can distinguish these two sounds accurately with a minimal pair exercise. The teacher says one form of *can* and asks students whether it is the strong (/kæn/) or weak (/kən/) form. Next, the teacher can briefly use some imitation exercises, saying aloud and having students repeat the two forms of the word *can*. With these activities, the teacher can be sure that the students can recognize and produce these two sounds, at this point, in isolation.

It's usually easier for my students to pronounce the weak form in isolation than in a sentence, so controlled practice with sentences is needed. I have them read the model sentences out loud; if necessary, I read first and the students repeat. After they have read these three sentences correctly a few times, drilling can reinforce the proper pronunciation of the weak form in sentences. I have found that there is no need to practice the strong form, because my students are quite familiar with it.

Substitution drills can be used. Based on the model sentence "He can swim," the teacher can give some cue words. For example, the verb *dance* is given, and students have to produce the sentence "He can dance." If the pronoun *they* is given, then the students have to produce "They can swim," etc. This kind of substitution drilling should be done first in chorus and then individually. Choral drilling can help to build students' confidence and give them the chance to practice anonymously, without feeling nervous about whether they can pronounce correctly in front of the entire class (Kelly 2000). After the choral drilling, the teacher can call on individual students to pronounce. In this way, the teacher can determine how well individuals can pronounce the weak form in sentences.

At this point of instruction, there are other kinds of activities that can be used in teaching weak forms. One is the use of a tape recorder. Students read aloud and record a dialogue or passage then compare their reading with a recording of the same material made by fluent speakers of English, paying special attention to the weak forms used. This activity not only raises students' awareness of weak forms, but also helps them to know what they need to improve in their pronunciation.

After the weak forms of some function words have been taught, the teacher can give students a listening passage to practice recognition. Students identify the strong and weak forms of function words in the passage. Also, students can listen to a passage from which some function words have been deleted; they have to decide which form is appropriate (strong or weak) and fill in the blanks.

Communicative practice

If only controlled practice is used in teaching weak forms, the teacher cannot be sure whether the students can apply what they have

learned in natural English speech and the students may get bored with the mechanical drills. The teacher must involve students in meaningful and communicative pronunciation activities to make learning interesting and motivating (Fangzhi 1998:39). Therefore the teacher must design some communicative activities in which the weak forms will inevitably be used. The following three-step activity is one that I have used successfully with my students:

1. In pairs, students interview each other about what special skills each of them has.
2. If the initial questions are not adequate for the students to get a comprehensive idea of the special abilities of his/her partner, the student being interviewed should provide more information voluntarily.
3. Students report to the whole class what abilities his/her partner has.

In this activity, students get a lot of chances to practice the two forms of *can*. In step 1, some interview questions should contain *can*, for example: "Can you play _____ (a game or sport)?" "What else can you do?" "I remember you can _____, can't you?" The answers "Yes, I can" and "No, I can't" will be used. In step 2, the statement "I can _____" will be used spontaneously. In this activity, both the strong form and weak form should be used in the students' speech many times, so the teacher can determine whether students can use them in the appropriate places. In the interview, stu-

dents ask their partners something that they don't know and talk about themselves, which makes this activity meaningful to them.

To encourage students' spontaneous communication where the use of weak forms is almost inevitable, the teacher can organize other activities, such as role plays. In this kind of activity, students are given the opportunity to practice the weak form in a meaningful context.

Conclusion

Weak forms are an important component of natural and fluent English speaking, but systematic teaching of the weak form has been ignored in China. I have found that students who receive systematic instruction in weak forms over a period of time show a significant improvement in their production and comprehension of spoken English.

References

- Fangzhi, Cheng. 1998. The teaching of pronunciation to Chinese students of English. *English Teaching Forum*, 36, 1, pp. 37-39.
- Kelly, G. 2000. *How to teach pronunciation*. London: Longman/Pearson Education Limited.
- Mayers, R. P. 1981. A new approach to the teaching of weak form. *ELT Journal*, 35, 1, pp. 421-426.
- Seymour, G. 1969. *Practical English phonetics*. London: Leonard Hill.

Liang Wenxia is an EFL lecturer in the College of Foreign Languages at Hebei Normal University in Shijiazhuang, China.