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Achieving Intelligibility in Spoken English: the Role of Weak Forms

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Abstract

The major objective of this essay is to show how weak forms are frequently misused among speakers of English as a foreign language, giving as a result numerous misunderstandings. The data used for this study were obtained from papers written by specialized scholars on this field and also actual teaching materials, which were chosen because they are now used in Spain. It was concluded that learners of English as a foreign language could improve their phonological competence, in both production and perception, if recent approaches were applied to teaching oral skills including phonology.

Resumen

El objetivo principal de este trabajo es mostrar cómo las llamadas *weak forms* en el inglés hablado son frecuentemente mal utilizadas por los hablantes de inglés como lengua extranjera, dando como resultado numerosos malentendidos. La información utilizada para este estudio se obtuvo de artículos escritos por autores especializados en este campo, así como de materiales de enseñanza que actualmente se utilizan en España. Finalmente, se sugiere la posibilidad de mejorar la competencia fonológica de los estudiantes, tanto en producción como en percepción, aplicando nuevos enfoques que pudieran potenciar la enseñanza de las destrezas orales en la lengua inglesa.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction	3
2. Methods and materials	4
3. Results	5
3.1 Presenting the issue. Weak forms	5
3.2 Weak forms in textbooks	7
3.3 Standard accent usually taught	12
3.3.1 Accent	13
3.4 Rhythm	15
3.5 Importance of being aware.....	18
3.6 Some controversial or opposing views	23
3.7 The future standard.....	24
4. Discussion	25
References of words cited	27
References of teaching materials	28
Appendix	30

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to underscore the importance of learning the so-called weak forms (WFs) in English to achieve intelligibility among speakers regardless their mother tongue (L1). My approach to the issue will be a theoretical one, although some instances from authentic teaching materials can be found along this essay. The subject matter of the study arose from a professional need of giving WFs the importance they have in connected speech, and from their frequent misuse, which can lead to embarrassing misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

After I revised some written data on this issue (see sections 3.1 and 3.2 below), it became evident how English learners are currently facing problems of unintelligibility due to the lack of knowledge of phonetics and phonology. Evidence presented in section 3.5 also rendered how phonology together with listening are the skills most teachers of English pay no attention to and how this deficiency is inherited by students (SS).

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the need of designing improved materials as well as innovative approaches of teaching with the aim of obtaining better results in oral skills, both receptive and productive, when English is used among speakers from different cultures. This paper reports the findings of a miniscale

investigation demonstrating the neglect of this key section of the English language.

This brief introduction is followed by an explanation and discussion of concepts such as accent, standard accent, rhythm, controversial views to the issue as well as the future standard some authors propose, in order to show the importance of being aware of the use of WFs.

2. Methods and materials

Since this paper is based on teaching materials and articles in order to present the current issues in the use of WFs, and also on how some scholars are conscious of its difficulties, it is important to provide a clear picture by defining WFs in the context of various prosodic features involved in connected speech.

To answer the issue posed in the introduction, several studies have been analyzed in order to know how WFs are presented in academic contexts. Textbooks by different publishing houses – teacher's books and student's books – have also been analyzed in order to identify the approach which authors working for particular publishers tend to adopt or intend to convey to teachers and learners.

My intention is to show how WFs are sometimes forgotten to teach due to the difficulty learning phonetics and phonology entails, which inevitably leads to the lack of knowledge most teachers of English as a foreign language seem to have.

All the papers and manuals were selected from actual materials teachers use in Spain, from a random search on the internet and from different libraries. All the papers and books under examination are written in English.

3. Results

3.1 Presenting the issue. WFs

Several definitions of WFs have been proposed (Gimson, 2014; Hewings, 2007; Roach, 2010; Wells, 2008). All scholars trying to provide a description of WFs agree on indicating that the unaccented patterns of these words are their normal pronunciation, and on how these reduced forms are an essential part in natural speech.

WFs are a number of common words with special pronunciations; this is not visible in their written realizations since they always maintain the same spelling, thus it may not be possible to talk about spoken English without considering them. WFs are approximately 40 words¹ which possess two different pronunciations (some of them even more than two) depending on the context in which they occur or the purpose of the speaker. Their normal or unmarked usage in natural speech is the weak one leaving the strong one for emphasis or contrast, when they are uttered in isolation and when they occur at the end of a speech unit except if they are personal pronouns, which keep their WF. Almost all of them belong to a category called

¹ Appendix contains the list of weak forms.

grammatical or function words and do not provide any actual meaning within an utterance, since the lexical or content words are the ones that carry the content. They only act as facilitators of the discourse, although confusing their pronunciation can change the meaning of what we say drastically as is the case with the word 'that' in the following example:

A: I think that God doesn't exist

If we use the demonstrative adjective 'that' which only possesses one pronunciation (strong) / 'ðæt /, the meaning of this utterance will be that there are more than one god, and only the one we are referring to is the one that the speaker thinks does not exist.

B: I think that God doesn't exist

If we use the WF / ðæt / the meaning changes. This time it is a conjunction used to introduce a that-clause and the meaning here is that there is only one god and the speaker thinks it does not exist.

According to Roach, "it *is* possible to use only strong forms in speaking and some **foreigners** do this." (2010, p. 102 — my emphasis). However, this does not sound natural at all; this way of speaking may accentuate some lack of proficiency in the use of language. But when we are not native English speakers and we 'dare' to use this language in international contexts, we may like to sound

as best as possible, trying to avoid some particular traces in our accent that could point to us as foreigners.

Given that WFs are words that are reduced naturally in connected speech by native speakers, learners normally do not notice this, especially if their L1 is syllable-timed. As the concept of rhythm and its understanding is a central part of languages, this will be further explained in a forthcoming section devoted entirely to its discussion as mentioned in the introduction. Most of the languages spoken all over the world are syllable-timed, that is, all the syllables pronounced by a speaker receive roughly the same amount of time and effort, none of the syllables is debilitated. The rhythm of English is not syllable-timed, what means that there are some syllables in connected speech that are debilitated getting rid of some consonants and reducing full vowels to weak central ones (/ə ʊ ɪ /). Noticing how some syllables or whole words are weakened in ordinary speech is a tough task to fulfill for non native speakers' (NNS) ears. Thereby, it is the duty of teachers and handbooks to warn students about it.

3.2 WFs in textbooks

Most of the teachers of English as a foreign language use textbooks or manuals as one of the indispensable tools to guide SS in their learning. For every student's book, there is a counterpart for teachers with some proposals to use it properly. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of learning WFs to achieve intelligibility

among speakers. In view of that, one of the main concerns of this study will be the approach textbooks adopt on this subject. After having revised some teacher's books from different publishing houses (Oxford and Cambridge)², what I have found is that almost none of them have mentioned anything about this issue until recent editions.

On the one hand, in the case of Oxford, I have examined all the available levels of its collection *New English File* in Spain today from beginners to advanced learners (from A1 to C1 levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). It is true that, in their elementary book (A1), they state "Elementary learners... are often frustrated by English pronunciation, particularly the sound-spelling relationships, silent letters, and weak forms." (Clive and Latham-Koenig, 2010, p. 8). So they are aware of the situation, but there is nothing else related to this topic and the methods or approaches the book means to use to help instructors teach them.

The student's books from this collection are structured in units and, within each unit, there are some pronunciation exercises. These exercises present isolated sounds, stress, word stress, sentence stress and intonation, but the methodology is based on repetition or drills, so the explanation of prosodic features of the language is up to teachers, and, as indicated before, there are not any indications for them to follow. Therefore, if a learner only repeats some utterances without any provided context, most likely s/he will not learn how to

² See references for teaching materials.

use WFs in real conversation. In my opinion, there is nothing the matter with the way the pronunciation exercises are designed, but it is not realistic. There are several exercises with the instruction 'copy the rhythm' but these speech units are not explicitly related to the question of WFs and how they give shape to the rhythm to be copied: "I'll be late for work / You'll break your leg. / She'll miss the train. / It'll rain tomorrow. / They'll lose the match." (Oxeden and Latham-Koenig, 2005, p. 31). Here it is where teachers should try to make the most of it and suggest more follow up practice with a theoretical explanation within the framework of phonology because this kind of exercises allows them to do so.

I explored the rest of the levels in both student's and teacher's books and what I found is that this collection deals with suprasegmental features such as sentence stress and rhythm, but once its methodology is revised, these books do not explain how to articulate WFs, a core component of the skills they want to model. All the collection poses the same type of pronunciation exercises mentioned above, namely, repetition of sentences without any phonetic or phonological context.

On the other hand, something is changing in Cambridge University Press. I also revised the lowest levels of two of its collections (*English in Mind* and *Face2face*). What I found is that, in the case of *English in Mind* (Puchta and Stranks, 2010), from the first unit, there are pronunciation exercises along the teacher's book orientated

specifically to deal with WFs and when or how to use them. The instructions given are very clear as can be seen in the following instance taken from the first pronunciation exercise:

Ask a student to come out and underline or circle as appropriate. Remind SS that they are circling when the form is weak and underlining when the form is stressed...They may find it helpful to listen to the recording twice, once for weak forms and the second time for stressed forms. (p. 19)

This is so throughout this book. In the case of the student's book, all the pronunciation exercises are gathered together in a separate section. That way, SS may find it helpful to go over just a few pages placed at the end of the book to review only pronunciation instead of having to revise the entire book to find these exercises. This shows how, more and more, publishers are introducing exercises designed to teach WFs from elementary levels.

In the *Face2face* (2013) collection, from A1 level, they announce: "...drills focus on sentence stress, weak forms, intonation..." (Redston, Day, with Cunningham, p. 20) and this is exactly what we find in the student's book. It is full of pronunciation exercises all over every page. They use a brilliant method consisting of marking the stress of every single new word by drawing a dot upon the stressed syllable, and they expand it to larger units such as phrases or sentences. This method seems excellent because they try to model spoken English from the very first time a student finds a word, reducing the possibilities of learning a wrong pronunciation. Every time a WF

appears, there are words of warning and phonetic transcriptions to instruct the right pronunciation as the next instance displays:

HELP WITH LISTENING Weak forms (3): prepositions

Remember: we often say small words (*do, dies, you, was, were, can, etc.*) with a schwa /ə/. These are called weak forms.

4.a Listen to these sentences from conversations A and B. Notice how we say the prepositions in pink³. Are these words stressed?

We lived there **for** /fə/ 12 years and then we moved to /tə/ London.

I stayed **at** /ət/ home all weekend.

It's about two hours **from** /frəm/ Cork airport.

And all **of** /əv/ the houses are different colours. (Redston, Cunningham, 2013, p. 56)

Once SS are familiarized with this methodology, it seems easier to add more suprasegmental features of English such as linking. In this book, a speech unit is presented advising SS how they expect to hear it and how they actually will hear it:

HELP WITH LISTENING Linking (1)

We usually link consonant (*b, c, d, f, etc.*) sounds at the end of a word with vowel (*a, e, I, o, u*) sounds at the beginning of the next word.

4.a Listen and notice the linking.

YOU EXPECT TO HEAR

And all of

The people are nice

And all of the people are nice.

YOU USUALLY HEAR

And_all_of

The people_are nice

And_all_of the people_are nice

(Redston, Cunningham, 2013, p. 32)

³ They are highlighted in bold in this paper.

The revision of these teaching materials reveals that there is a common element, the oral exercises used to teach how to articulate this aspect of the English language. There are some recordings with supposedly real conversations and, in some cases, even follow up exercises. Accordingly, SS are enabled to increase their confidence in the development of their oral skills. There are even some useful pieces of advice within the listening and pronunciation sections to guide SS towards the right pronunciation. These recommendations bring to the fore the importance of having some knowledge on phonetics and phonology, as the following extracts show: "Learning to recognize phonetic symbols will help you to improve your pronunciation, especially when you look up new words in a dictionary." (Clive, Latham-Koenig, 2008b, p. 4). They even refer to more complex concepts "Remember the 'music' of English comes from its rhythm and intonation. This depends a lot on the mixture of 'strong' and 'weak' syllables in a sentence. Getting this right will make you sound more fluent" (p. 70). Although the next section in this essay should deal with the concept of rhythm, it is, first, necessary to find out which accent these books suggest as the standard of learning, since, as will be discussed, not all varieties of English are pronounced with the same 'musical' patterns.

3.3 Standard accent usually taught

After having observed the presentation of WFs in teaching materials, my next concern was to identify the accent SS are expected to

imitate. It is important to discuss this question, since today, more and more people use English as a lingua franca (Crystal, 1997) and the majority of them are not native speakers. Therefore, it seems necessary to imitate widely understandable spoken varieties. Only some of the books state this clearly "... [Drills] give standard British native-speaker models of the language being taught." (Redston, Day, with Cunningham, 2013, p. 22), but in almost 100% of the cases it is British English.

3.3.1 Accent

With regard to accent, McMahon asserts

Any description of 'an accent' is necessarily an idealization, since no two speakers will use precisely the same system in precisely the same way... Nonetheless, two speakers of [the same standard]... will have a common core of features, which allows them to be grouped together by speakers of the same accent, by speakers of other accents, and by phonologists. (2002, p. 93)

What seems obvious is that if accent is an 'idealization', SS should not strive to sound exactly as native English speakers, since they are not; SS should be realistic and set intelligibility among their goals. Subsequently, in the same chapter, McMahon provides a definition of accent: "an idealized system which speakers of that variety share" (p. 93). Therefore, what SS may imitate to learn a specific accent is what makes it different from the others, its distinctive features. An understandable instance of noticing specific features of one accent could be the contrast between rhotic and non-rhotic accents. That is,

in rhotic varieties – as for example General American –, the sound /r/ is generally pronounced in all the positions it appears, a trait usually perceived by SS without difficulty. On the other hand, there are non-rhotic accents – such as British English –, which exclude this sound unless it occurs between vowel sounds. Of course there are many more distinctive features in every single variety, which are just what SS ought to imitate once they choose a variety as a model. However, something all standards proposed as models share is the use of WFs; they are not a feature which serves to differentiate accents, WFs are a common element present in all the accents. Consequently, learning WFs is a very realistic goal.

Native speakers (NS) of any language in the world are capable of recognizing accents of their mother tongue from different countries, cities or even parts of the areas in where they live. NS acquire their L1 naturally taking as models members of their family who are also NS. That way, all speakers develop the representative accent from the place they reside when acquiring an L1. Without a doubt, this is the situation for native English speakers while the rest of users of English have to learn it as a foreign language. To do so, learners also need some models to imitate.

McMahon affirms “...individuals adopt a particular mode of speech (or more accurately, move along a continuum of modes of speech) depending on who they want to identify with, who they are talking to, and what impression they want to make.” (2002, p. 92). If a student

tries to enhance their performance of spoken English, s/he will probably choose as a norm an accent that makes them sound as natural as possible, a standard or a neutral one.

For that reason, every single student of English, if s/he liked to control this language, would attempt to do their best to convey a wonderful impression of themselves by avoiding sounding illiterate due to the accent they reproduce, since, as McMahon indicates, "Accent is clearly extremely important, as one of the major tools we use in drawing inferences about our fellow humans, and in projecting particular images of ourselves." (2002, p. 93). However, as we learn English, we do not come across many options in order to decide whether we prefer one particular accent or not, since we learn the standard one that textbooks and manuals offer, British English being the norm in the books studied in this paper as indicated before. There must be a reason for this choice, which will be dealt with in the section entitled "The future standard".

3.4 Rhythm

The concept of stress is also an important consideration. To start with, stress is an essential concept to understand the rhythm of English – stress-timed (Pike, 1945, p. 35) – when SS begin their learning process, especially if their L1 is syllable-timed. Secondly, the term 'stress' is one of the first features of spoken English that most SS learn. There are some allusions to this term along the textbooks

analyzed in this essay starting at the most basic levels; for example, "Word stress is important. Underline the stressed syllable in these words..." (Clive, Latham-Koenig, and Seligson, 2004b, p. 5). Bearing this in mind from the very beginning of the learning process is primordial to understand how this language is pronounced. However, the concepts of stress or stress-timed entail many more implications.

At the level of the word, when it contains more than one syllable, it is very clear that its main stress falls into one syllable leaving the rest as unstressed ones. When several words are pronounced together forming an utterance, the concept of prominence appears, a stressed syllable being more prominent than the others are. It is here that we have the stress-timed rhythm, by combining some stressed syllables with some unstressed ones in an utterance. What occurs is that some of the unstressed syllables can be, and in fact are, whole words of a grammatical nature, and we have to apply this stress-timed rhythm to the whole utterance, including these function words in their WFs, without stressing them.

It is also necessary to distinguish between full and reduced vowels because this has a lot to do with the concepts of timing and, in consequence, with WFs "Indeed, the occurrence of full vowels generally predicts the rhythm of English rather more usefully than any notion of stress" (Gibson, 2014, p. 271). In connected speech,

the reduced vowels are /ə ʊ ɪ / and they are the vowels we find in almost all WFs.

Although the rhythm of English has been considered stress-timed for the last decades, some scholars are now trying to prove otherwise. According to Nishihara, "a number of new varieties of English... have shifted the traditional stress-timed rhythm to syllable rhythm." (2010, p. 155). He names several varieties, viz, Standard Nigerian English, New Zealand English, South African Black English, Hong Kong English and some Asian varieties. However, he also recognizes that this is due to the proximity of other languages spoken in those areas as an L1 or L2. In his own words: " in many varieties of English the shift has been from stress-timed to syllable-timed rhythm, almost always demonstrably as a result of contact with syllable-timed languages" (p. 161). He also argues that "syllable-timed rhythm is in itself unmarked, and therefore simpler to acquire, than stress-timed rhythm." (p. 161). He only provides instances of varieties from the expanding circle, but native speakers from the inner circle are also in contact with people whose L1 is syllable-timed and they do not change the rhythm of their spoken English.

Following with the issue of rhythm, Crystal cites Roach by quoting his conclusions on this matter "Roach... concludes 'there is no language which is totally syllable-timed or totally stress-timed...'" (1995, p.

175) but Crystal only reproduces this statement to provide some criticism

I do do not think the conclusion has been followed up by appropriate empirical observation. Just how much syllable-timing is there in English, for example?...in speech which is expressive of several emotions, such as irritation and sarcasm... Many cartoon characters... Airspeak and Seaspeak... Various television and radio commercials... (p. 175-6)

In other words, if the rhythm of English is stress-timed, weak forms are essential components of its spoken form. These answers reinforce the status of English as a stress-timed language and, consequently, the importance of learning WFs.

3.5 Learners do not notice WFs – importance of being aware

This simple reflection “It’s not what she says, but **how** she says it.” (Clennell, 1997, p. 117 – my emphasis) summarizes perfectly the importance of being aware of the importance which learning pronunciation has. That is to say, misunderstandings among speakers are frequently due to wrong pronunciation of units larger than words when speakers of English from the outer circle (Kachru, 1992) are engaged in cross-cultural communication. Clennell claims that those misunderstandings could be avoided if learners would learn intonation (1997, p. 117-18). He also argues that, as a matter of fact, “the successful use of discourse intonation could well be the key to effective cross-cultural communication.” (p. 117). This is a truthful statement. However, to know the right use of intonation patterns, a

speech unit has to be deconstructed into smaller units since, unless for emphasis or contrast, the voice starts to fall or rise into the last stressed syllable of a tone unit.

If a speaker changes the standard intonation patterns it is because they may want to convey something different from the standard statement or question. Of course, English native speakers know how to apply all the patterns of their L1, and this is something NNS have to learn, as they learn grammar or vocabulary, if they want to achieve mutual understanding in cross-cultural communication. But, unfortunately, the teaching of oral skills has been the usually forgotten part, as Crawford and Ueyama claim: "despite its importance for the linguistic development of learners, listening does not get the attention it deserves... the skill has been, and continues to be, on the back burner..." (2011, p. 55). Therefore, it seems almost impossible to teach phonological aspects if listening is not properly taught. To learn how to articulate English, first, SS should listen to it, before reading it in its written realization. Because otherwise they cannot guess that there are some debilitated words (WFs), as Clennell wisely affirms: "Learners frequently have listening difficulties because they try to identify every item of the utterance..." (1997, p. 119). SS do not take the utterance as a whole, they try to break it into isolated words, and this is so because prosodic features are not taken as seriously as, for instance, grammar.

To achieve a real change in teaching oral skills the first step could be to be opened to new approaches:

of course the most important change of all, not changes in the language but changes in attitudes. Because there's no point in keeping oneself up to date in research...if these factors affect one's teaching strategies not a jot... Therefore in a sense the most important thing is a greater awareness, a greater preparedness to alter one's teaching strategies... at least in teaching listening comprehension... (Crystal, 1991)

Clennell continues adding more reasons why NNS should learn prosodic features, stating that this is not only a phonological issue, in fact it has to do with pragmatics:

A failure to make full use of English prosodic features has crucial consequences in NS/NNS oral interaction... [The] essential information... may not be fully grasped... [The] pragmatic meaning may be misunderstood... Inter-speaker co-operation may be poorly controlled. (p. 118)

However, the first step to learn intonation patterns should be to learn weak forms. Patterns of intonation change because the voice falls or rises on the final stressed syllable of an utterance "... a relatively small phonetic change, but with profound consequences for meaning." (Clennell, p. 120). If we do not want to emphasize or contrast any particular item within an utterance, the theoretical change of pitch should be placed in the last stressed syllable of the speech unit. If we want to emphasize some word, we have to apply this change of pitch on the word we want to put the emphasis upon. Therefore, if we place the stress in every word and pronounce all the function words with their strong form, we are emphasizing all the

words and this is exactly what leads to misunderstandings among speakers. The same unit articulated by a NS, with the right use of WFs, can change drastically its meaning if it is uttered by a NNS with strong forms:

NS: I can go to the party / aɪ kən 'gəʊ tə ðə 'pɑ:ti /

NNS: I can go to the party / aɪ 'kæn 'gəʊ tu: ði: 'pɑ:ti /

While the meaning of the written sentence is clear – the speaker is able to go to the party – if we use the strong form of 'can' what we are saying is its negative form 'can't' since 'can' does not fulfill any of the requisites to be pronounced with its strong form and 'can't' only has one pronunciation (strong).

It is just the other way around; we have to use strong forms only to dispel misunderstandings, not to create them as is shown in the following example where the place of the stress and, therefore, the use of the strong forms are written in capital letters:

A: Are you ok? Do you have a cold?

B: No, it's pretty warm in here.

A: I asked if you HAVE a cold

B: Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't know that you have a cold.

A: No, not me. I wanted to know if YOU have a cold.

B: No, I don't. I'm ok, thanks.

The articulation of certain words using their WFs is not due to laziness from native speakers or to informal conversation as many could

think; this is the right way of pronouncing them. Pronouncing these words with their strong forms is what breaks the rhythm of English and, in consequence, leads to misunderstandings as explained above. In view of that, this failure is not only due to the interference the L1 of NNS may provoke or because they are not familiarized with prosodic skills. It could also be due to the lack of knowledge of phonetics of many teachers as Clennell remarks: "Few if any teachers come... with an adequate understanding of English intonation in natural discourse... and a lack of precision in describing suprasegmental features of phonology." (p. 118).

Accordingly, if we combine the avoidance of teaching WFs with poor materials, since "the methods employed to teach it [listening] have not been subject to much critical review." (Crawford and Ueyama, 2011, p. 55), the result is a non-successful achievement of the proficiency of English as Crystal suggests:

Decades of experience of teaching English as a foreign language tells us that most learners have considerable difficulty mastering the weak vowel system in the language, and the most usual residual deficiency in a fluent learner's accent is likely to relate to this area. (1995, p. 177)

The quality of vowels plays an essential role regarding WFs and rhythm; it is very important to learn their articulation, because it is very difficult to predict how a word will sound if we only see its written form, especially when we talk about weak forms. Therefore,

learning the vocalic sound system of English is necessary if we want to achieve intelligibility.

3.6 Some controversial or opposing views

According to some scholars (Nishihara, 2010; Roach, 1982), some new English standards from the expanding circle are emerging as syllable-timed varieties. However, their conclusions point out that this is due to the proximity of other syllable-timed languages as indicated previously in this paper, in section 3.4 "Rhythm". It is true that today, the English language is used as lingua franca, and this has to do with the vast amount of speakers that use it, not with the number of native speakers.

It could be true that in some years this language may change. But it happens that the emerging syllable-timed varieties named above belong to some countries with little if no economic or political power. Although the number of varieties of English could overcome those from the inner circle – and in fact this is the case today – countries from the first world will remain as more powerful, and this is what actually gave its status to this global language as Crystal cleverly affirms: "To what extent could the syllable-timed speech of India influence other varieties, such as Standard British English? This is unlikely, because Indian English has a low-prestige value in Britain." (1995, p. 177). This answer could be applicable to the rest of syllable-timed varieties too.

3.7 The future standard

Many more varieties may possibly arise, and even the number of NS may decrease, but while powerful countries keep on holding economic and political world power, everything regarding the rhythm of the pronunciation of English will remain the same, with no changes: “most of the things that are cited these days as being examples of change in English are **not real** changes at all...” (1991, Crystal – my emphasis). If textbooks here in Spain propose British English as the standard variety, this means we will have to learn a stress-timed accent, plenty of weak forms. If we have a prestigious accent as a model, it seems nonsensical to learn a variety only spoken in, for instance, a small region of Africa only because this variety is syllable-timed. The election of the standard varieties as models is not only a question related to the number of speakers, but also to politics and economy, it is a cultural phenomenon.

One alternative Crystal proposes is the so-called *Mid-Atlantic accent*. He defines this accent as “a cross between American and British intonation, a slower, more drawled, slightly nasal tone which to an American ear sounds British but to a British ear sounds American. It’s neither one thing nor the other.” (1991, Lecture “The Changing English Language”). A similar sort of blend is the solution Gimson also seems to propose to achieve intelligibility in cross-cultural communication: “learners may wish to aim at a version of AMALGAM ENGLISH, based on an amalgam of native speaker Englishes... a type

of Amalgam English may often be a more realistic target. " (2014, p. 327). If this variety is a mixture between the two most important accents, this means it will have plenty of weak forms. Today, with the massive use of new digital technology, everything becomes global. Now, NNS are able to listen to spoken English much more easily than ever. They only have to turn the television on and they can hear music and films in their original English version. That way, they can listen to NS from everywhere, any time and, therefore, they unconsciously acquire some spoken English.

4. Discussion

Since the main goal of this study was not to design improved teaching materials or advise current teachers, no further examination of materials has been made. It was aimed at drawing attention to some common words (WFs) that can go unnoticed by NNS. Also, it was meant to highlight the importance of learning them in order to achieve intelligibility and avoid misunderstandings.

Two publishers have been revised and what seems evident is that old materials should be updated on the one hand, and, on the other, that if teachers are not well prepared or have doubts they should just follow carefully the instructions from recent materials and update themselves too.

As indicated in the introduction, the subject matter of this study arose from a professional need of giving WFs the importance they

deserve. During my short experience in teaching and as a learner in the English language classroom, what I have observed is that teachers tend to accept almost all spoken contributions from students as good ones when the latter participate in a lesson. That way, what is being rewarded is participation, and nothing else. If we want to create a stronger impact on SS as regards the learning of pronunciation, positive stimuli should only be given when the student's intervention is really great or fantastic, that is to say, when their performance is also worthwhile at the level of production or articulation. Consequently, if that is the teaching and learning context, SS will probably make the effort to try and set their goals at a level in which they know they will be performing really well, and they may thus consider weak forms an essential element of their spoken English as well as an attainable goal.

In this respect, it cannot be ignored that the CEFRL (< http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf>) establishes the competences that have to be achieved for evaluation in the different levels of English, and that the linguistic competence includes a phonological competence that comprises reductions and in turn WFs (CEFRL, p. 117). The production and perception of WFs must thus be considered as one more component in the teaching and learning of spoken English.

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Word Count 6611

Appendix. List of weak forms.

WORD	STRONG FORM	WEAK FORM
A	eɪ	ə
AM	æm	m əm
AN	æn	ən
AND	ænd	ənd ən n
ARE	ɑ:(r)	ə(r)
AS	æz	əz
AT	æt	ət
BE	bi:	bɪ
BEEN	bi:n	bɪn
BUT	bʌt	bət
CAN (aux.)	kæn	kən
COULD	kʊd	kəd
DO (aux.)	du:	d də d
DOES (aux.)	dʌz	dəz z s
FOR	fɔ:(r)	fə(r)
FROM	fɹɒm	fɹəm
HAD (aux.)	hæd	həd əd / d
HAS (aux.)	hæz	həz əz

		z s
HAVE (aux.)	hæv	hæv əv v
HE	hi:	hi: hɪ i: ɪ
HER	hɜ:	hə(r) ɜ:(r) ə(r)
HIM	hɪm	ɪm
HIS	hɪz	hɪz ɪz
IS	ɪz	ɪz z s
JUST (adv.)	dʒʌst	dʒəst dʒəs
ME	mi:	mi: mɪ
MUST	mʌst	məst məs
NOT	nɒt	nt
OF	ɒv	əv
SAINT	seɪnt	snt sn
SHALL	ʃæl	ʃ ʃəl
SHE	ʃi:	ʃi:

		ʃɪ
SHOULD	ʃʊd	ʃəd
SIR	sɜ:(r)	sə(r)
SOME	sʌm	səm sm
THAN	ðæn	ðən
THAT	ðæt	ðət
THE	ði:	ði ðə
THEM	ðem	ðəm
THERE	ðeə(r)	ðə(r)
TO	tu:	tə tʊ
US	ʌs	əs
WAS	wɒz	wəz
WE	wi:	wi: wi
WERE	wɜ:(r)	wə(r)
WHO	hu:	hu: hʊ u: ʊ
WILL	wɪl	wəl l
WOULD	wʊd	wəd əd d
YOU	ju:	ju: jʊ / jə