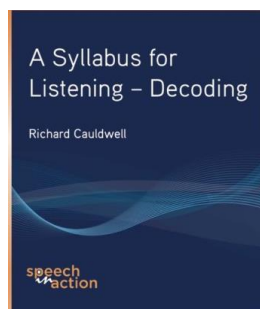


# A Syllabus for Listening – Decoding

Reviewed by Jonathan Marks



Cauldwell, R. (2018). *A Syllabus for Listening – Decoding*. Birmingham: Speech in Action.

ISBN 978-0-9543447-7-1, 240 pp.

Listening and reading are conventionally classified as ‘receptive’ skills, but this is highly misleading, and especially so in the case of listening: receiving something – a parcel, a letter, a present, an award – doesn’t normally require much skill, or effort, and yet learners of English who reach a high level of proficiency in other skills often struggle to understand the ‘sound substance’ of spontaneous speech. *A Syllabus for Listening – Decoding* provides a thorough, convincing, well-exemplified explanation of why this is so, and goes on to propose activities to add an extra dimension to listening lessons and prepare learners for their encounters with spoken English outside the classroom – spoken English which has not been scripted, rehearsed or selected and which has to be apprehended as it is produced, warts and all, and where the priming and support typically provided in listening lessons by pre-teaching, schema activation, the attention-focusing of comprehension questions and so on are not usually available.

The similarity of routine methodology for reading and listening work in ELT fails to take account of key differences between speech and writing, and the different decoding requirements they impose. Speech styles vary along a continuum from the ‘Greenhouse’ (citation forms) via the ‘Garden’ (where predictable processes of ‘connected speech’ operate) to the ‘Jungle’, where words mutate and intertwine in luxuriant and unpredictable profusion – and *confusion*. The Garden is an appropriate model for learners to use when working on their own pronunciation, but when it comes to listening, they need to be able to find their way through the Jungle and avoid being entangled and buried in the foliage.

Using the book and the recordings on the accompanying website as a guide, readers are taken on a tour – to use an alternative metaphor – of a sub-atomic universe of sound where particles appear fleetingly, leave barely perceptible traces, change their form, merge, blur and bully each other out of existence in ways that go far beyond

the realms of weak forms, linking, elision and assimilation familiar to ELT, and these ubiquitous, teeming, sub-atomic phenomena form the basis of the decoding syllabus.

All words – not only the few generally recognised as having ‘weak forms’ – are ‘flexiforms’ which can appear in unpredictable guises in the Jungle. The speed of spontaneous speech varies constantly; commonly-occurring word clusters such as ‘Do you know what I mean?’ tend to be spoken particularly fast, and the phonetic substance in them is subject to particularly drastic erosion, or ‘streamlining’, which largely erases the identity of the words they appear, in writing, to consist of. Streamlining and the resulting indeterminacy in the sound substance can even obliterate such fundamental semantic distinctions as positive vs. negative, active vs. passive and present vs. past.

As experienced ‘expert listeners’, our acquired ability to understand speakers’ meanings deafens us to what actually happens in spontaneous speech. What we hear, or rather what we think we hear, is based on acoustic scraps and hints plus expectations, choices between alternative interpretations on the basis of which ones seem more or less likely, and so on. This makes it hard for us to appreciate the difficulties less experienced listeners face.

The hints provided by the sound substance can often be interpreted in different ways, plausible or implausible. In one classroom listening activity reported by the author, learners heard ‘we don’t have many’ as ‘we have many’, ‘fifteen hundred’ as ‘fifty hundred’ and ‘pupils’ as ‘peoples’. Although, in the context, all of these clearly conflicted with the speaker’s meaning, they were what the author calls ‘reasonable hearings’, rather than *mishearings*, of the sound substance – hearings which expert listeners more or less automatically discard in favour of reasonable *interpretations*. For example, the author reports hearing a cricket commentator on the radio apparently say, before handing over to a colleague, ‘I’m completely sober’, and concluding that a reasonable interpretation was ‘I’ll complete this over’. It also sometimes happens that even expert listeners fail to come up with *any* reasonable interpretation of what they hear at all, and such experiences, together with ‘sober’ moments, provide glimpses of the plight of learner listeners, who are less willing to discard initial interpretations in favour of more plausible ones, and in any case less likely to have the knowledge of English to recognise either ‘sober’ or the particular use of ‘over’ as a noun in cricket.

Some of the methodological recommendations for decoding include the following:

- Give due attention to the need for learner education and teacher self-education.

- Work with the 'speech unit' as the unit of perception, because 'you need to hear more than a word to recognise a word'. Work particularly with commonly-occurring word clusters, because they are particularly subject to 'streamlining'.
- Accept that different listeners can hear different things in the stream of speech, rather than dismissing alternative hearings as failures or mishearings.
- Decoding work can both stand on its own and be incorporated into conventional listening skills lessons, for example in the form of extended 'post-listening' stages.
- Use 'vocal gymnastics' to reproduce stretches of Jungle speech, not for learners' own pronunciation but to sensitise them to what they hear, providing direct teaching and practice of speech streamlining processes.
- Traditional procedures using very short recorded extracts of spontaneous speech, such as dictation and gap-filling, can be used in the service of decoding.
- Practise converting short stretches of written text into Greenhouse speech.
- Introduce new vocabulary in phrases and collocations complete with 'Greenhouse' effects.

The text is divided into short sections, and key points are reiterated throughout, making it particularly accessible to readers unfamiliar with the issues described. Traditional terminology is eschewed in favour of more informal and perhaps more attractive metalanguage such as 'mush' ('the messy areas of the sound substance where it is difficult to determine where words begin and end, or indeed whether they have occurred at all'), 'polarisk' (an occasion when 'the sound substance is such that it is difficult to determine whether a positive or negative word form was intended by the speaker') and 'Tuesday-blend' (more formally 'yod coalescence', e.g. 'chewsday' for 'Tuesday').

Some use is made of phonemic/phonetic transcription, but informal re-spellings of sections of stretches of Jungle speech such as 'diiin' (did it in), 'ashy' (actually), 'anen' (and then), 'ever noise' (everyone always) are also used for a more dramatic and reader-friendly impact.

The final chapter (updated on the Speech in Action website) introduces internet and digital resources that can be used for decoding work.



Many members of the PronSIG have followed the development of Richard Cauldwell's ideas and materials for many years, and they will need little persuasion of the value of this latest contribution, but it deserves to reach a much wider readership. The author actually describes the book as 'essential reading' for teachers, teacher trainers and materials writers – a rather immodest claim, but I think he's right!

**Jonathan Marks**, former PronSIG Coordinator, is a freelance teacher trainer, author and translator based in Poland. His publications include *English Pronunciation in Use Elementary* (CUP 2007) and *The Book of Pronunciation* (Delta Publishing, 2012).

Email: [jonathanmarks@wp.pl](mailto:jonathanmarks@wp.pl)

## Join IATEFL



### Networking

- Join a global community of ELT professionals: teachers, trainers, researchers, writers, managers, publishers, assessors, lecturers and trainees in over 120 countries
- Apply to be a speaker at IATEFL conferences, webinars and events, and contribute to one of our publications
- Join one, or more, of our 16 Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and network with others who have the same professional interests as you

### Publications and news

- Monthly eBulletins, keeping you up to date with all things IATEFL, as well as our bi-monthly magazine, *Voices*
- Our annual Conference Selections publication, a collection of papers presented at the IATEFL conference
- Newsletters and resources from the SIG(s) you have joined
- Discounts on a wide range of leading ELT publications

### Professional development

- Discounted rates for our annual international IATEFL Conference and ELT Exhibition
- Monthly webinars from leading ELT professionals and an annual web conference
- SIG events throughout the year and throughout the world
- Access to nearly 30 scholarships which offer assistance to attend and present at our annual conference

### Global awareness and social responsibility

- As a registered charity IATEFL is proud to support the ELT community worldwide through our Wider Membership Scheme and IATEFL Projects with sustainable outcomes in areas of the world with fewer opportunities and resources for EFL professionals

Find out more and join at: [members.iatefl.org](http://members.iatefl.org)