

Teaching connected speech as a Didactic strategy for the improvement of pupils' communicative competence in Secondary schools in Goma

SHUKURU MIHIGO François*

Abstract

Communicative competence remains a central objective of English language teaching, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where learners have limited exposure to authentic spoken input. In secondary schools in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, pupils often display adequate grammatical knowledge but experience significant difficulties in understanding and producing natural spoken English. One contributing factor is the limited attention given to connected speech features in classroom instruction. This study investigates the effectiveness of teaching connected speech as a didactic strategy for improving pupils' communicative competence. A quasi-experimental design was employed involving an experimental group exposed to explicit instruction in connected speech and a control group taught through conventional pronunciation methods. Data were collected through listening comprehension tests, oral production assessments, classroom observations, and pre-test and post-test measures. The results indicate that pupils who received connected speech instruction demonstrated significant improvement in listening comprehension, fluency, and intelligibility compared to those in the control group. The study concludes that explicit instruction in connected speech enhances communicative competence and recommends its integration into secondary school English curricula in Goma.

Keywords: *connected speech, communicative competence, listening comprehension, pronunciation instruction, EFL, function words.*

Résumé

La compétence communicative constitue un objectif fondamental de l'enseignement de l'anglais, en particulier dans les contextes d'anglais comme langue étrangère où

* PhD Candidate, Department of African Studies and Globalisation, Specialization: African Literatures and Civilizations, **University of Dschang**, Cameroon, Collaborating Institute: **Adventist University of Goma**, DRC, E-mail : shukurumihigo@gmail.com, Telephone : +243 973 485 311.

l'exposition à l'anglais oral authentique est limitée. Dans les écoles secondaires de Goma, en République Démocratique du Congo, les élèves présentent souvent une maîtrise satisfaisante de la grammaire mais éprouvent d'importantes difficultés à comprendre et à produire un anglais oral naturel. L'un des facteurs explicatifs réside dans la faible prise en compte des phénomènes de la parole enchaînée dans l'enseignement. Cette étude examine l'efficacité de l'enseignement de la parole enchaînée comme stratégie didactique visant à améliorer la compétence communicative des élèves. Une méthode quasi-expérimentale a été adoptée, impliquant un groupe expérimental bénéficiant d'un enseignement explicite de la parole enchaînée et un groupe témoin soumis à des méthodes traditionnelles de prononciation. Les données ont été recueillies à l'aide de tests de compréhension orale, d'évaluations de production orale, d'observations en classe ainsi que de pré-tests et post-tests. Les résultats montrent une amélioration significative de la compréhension orale, de la fluidité et de l'intelligibilité chez les élèves du groupe expérimental. L'étude conclut que l'enseignement explicite de la parole enchaînée améliore la compétence communicative et recommande son intégration dans les programmes d'anglais au secondaire à Goma.

Mots-clés : parole enchaînée, compétence communicative, compréhension orale, enseignement de la prononciation, EFL (anglais langue étrangère), mots grammaticaux.

I. Introduction

English plays a crucial role as a global language of communication in education, science, technology, and international relations. Consequently, English language teaching increasingly emphasizes learners' ability to communicate effectively rather than merely mastering grammatical rules (Brown, 2007). In many EFL contexts, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, communicative competence remains a major challenge despite several years of formal instruction.

In secondary schools in Goma, English is taught as a compulsory subject; however, pupils' oral proficiency often remains limited. Learners may perform well in written examinations yet struggle to understand spoken English or express themselves fluently in real communicative situations. This discrepancy highlights a gap between classroom instruction

and actual language use, a problem frequently observed in foreign language contexts (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010).

One key factor contributing to this challenge is the manner in which pronunciation is taught. Traditional pronunciation instruction in many secondary schools focuses on isolated sounds and word-level accuracy, often neglecting the realities of natural spoken discourse. However, spoken English is produced in connected streams rather than in discrete units, and this continuous nature of speech gives rise to phenomena known as connected speech (Kelly, 2000).

In many EFL classrooms, pronunciation instruction emphasizes isolated sounds and word-level accuracy. While this approach helps learners articulate individual words, it does not prepare them for the realities of natural spoken discourse. Spoken English unfolds as a continuous stream, shaped by phonological processes such as linking, assimilation, elision, and weak forms (Kelly, 2000).

These features of connected speech are crucial for intelligibility and listening comprehension, yet they are rarely addressed explicitly in classroom practice (Underhill, 2005). As a result, learners often perceive spoken English as excessively fast or unclear, even when they recognize the vocabulary and grammar.

Communicative competence, as conceptualized by Hymes (1972), extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Listening and speaking skills are central to this competence, and without awareness of connected speech features, learners struggle to decode spoken messages and produce natural speech.

This challenge is particularly pronounced in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, where exposure to English outside the classroom is minimal. Pupils rely almost entirely on instructional input, and when classroom practices neglect connected speech, their oral development is severely limited (Gilbert, 2008).

Teaching connected speech as a didactic strategy offers a promising solution. Explicit instruction can raise learners' awareness of how spoken English operates in real contexts, enabling improvements in listening comprehension and oral production. This study therefore investigates the potential of connected speech instruction to enhance communicative competence among secondary school learners in Goma.

The present study therefore seeks to investigate the effectiveness of teaching connected speech as a didactic strategy for improving pupils' communicative competence in secondary schools in Goma. Specifically, the study examines whether explicit instruction in connected speech features leads to measurable improvements in listening comprehension and oral performance compared to traditional pronunciation teaching methods.

II. Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a quasi-experimental design, which is commonly used in educational research where random assignment is not feasible (Creswell, 2014). The design involved two intact groups: an experimental group and a control group. Both groups were subjected to pre-tests and post-tests to measure changes in communicative competence over the instructional period.

The independent variable was the teaching of connected speech, while the dependent variable was pupils' communicative competence, measured through listening comprehension and oral production performance.

2. Research Context

The research was conducted in selected secondary schools in Goma, a city in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo where English is taught as a foreign language. Instruction typically emphasizes grammar and written skills, with limited focus on spoken interaction. Such instructional practices have been shown to hinder the development of oral communicative competence in EFL contexts (Richards, 2006).

3. Participants

The participants consisted of 80 secondary school pupils, aged between 15 and 18 years. Forty pupils formed the experimental group, and forty constituted the control group. All participants had studied English for approximately the same duration and had not previously received formal instruction in connected speech.

4. Instructional Treatment

The experimental group received explicit instruction in connected speech over an eight-week period. Instruction focused on linking, assimilation, elision, and weak forms, using communicative activities such as dialogues, listening tasks, and role plays. Explicit phonological awareness activities were included to help learners notice differences between written and spoken English (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

The control group followed the regular pronunciation syllabus, which focused on isolated sounds and word-level pronunciation.

5. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using:

Listening comprehension tests

Oral production tests

Classroom observation checklists

These instruments are widely used to assess communicative competence in EFL research (Brown, 2007).

6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and percentage gains. Qualitative data from classroom observations were analyzed thematically to complement the quantitative findings.

III. Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of data collected from the listening comprehension tests, oral production tests, and classroom observations. The results are organized according to the main components of communicative competence assessed in the study: listening comprehension, oral fluency, intelligibility, and overall communicative performance.

1. Pre-test Results

Prior to the instructional intervention, both the experimental and control groups were administered identical listening comprehension and oral production pre-tests. The purpose of the pre-test was to establish whether the two groups were comparable in terms of communicative competence at the outset of the study.

The pre-test results indicated that the two groups had similar mean scores in both listening comprehension and oral production. In listening comprehension, pupils from both groups demonstrated difficulty understanding continuous spoken English, particularly when reduced forms, linking, and fast speech were involved. Examples of reduced forms include:

- going to → gonna (“I’m gonna study tonight”)
- want to → wanna (“Do you wanna join us?”)

These findings are consistent with previous observations that EFL learners often struggle with natural speech due to limited exposure to connected speech features (Underhill, 2005).

In the oral production pre-test, most pupils from both groups produced speech characterized by:

Word-by-word articulation

Limited fluency

Frequent pauses

Lack of rhythm and natural intonation

These results confirm that the experimental and control groups were comparable before the intervention, thereby validating the use of a quasi-experimental design (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) is referenced here to justify the methodological framework applied in the study, not to indicate his direct involvement.

2. Post-test Results: Listening Comprehension

After the eight-week instructional period, both groups were administered the same listening comprehension test used in the pre-test. The results revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups.

The experimental group demonstrated a substantial increase in mean listening comprehension scores. Pupils showed improved ability to:

Recognize linked words

Identify reduced forms of function words

Understand spoken messages delivered at natural speed. This improvement suggests that explicit instruction in connected speech helped learners develop more effective listening strategies. By becoming aware of how sounds change in continuous speech, pupils were better able to decode spoken input, supporting claims that phonological awareness is essential for listening comprehension (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). In contrast, the control group showed only a slight improvement in listening comprehension scores. Although some progress was observed, many pupils continued to experience difficulty understanding connected speech. This finding aligns with research indicating that traditional pronunciation instruction focusing on isolated sounds has limited impact on listening comprehension (Kelly, 2000).

3. Post-test Results: Oral Production

The oral production post-test revealed marked differences between the two groups. Pupils in the experimental group demonstrated noticeable improvement in several aspects of spoken performance.

i. Fluency

Fluency was assessed based on speech rate, pausing, and continuity of speech. The experimental group exhibited smoother speech with fewer unnecessary pauses. Pupils were able to produce longer stretches of speech without interruption, indicating increased confidence and automaticity. This improvement can be attributed to learners' familiarity with connected speech patterns, which reduced the cognitive load associated with word-by-word production (Brown, 2007). The control group, however, continued to rely heavily on slow, segmented speech. Although some pupils showed minor gains, overall fluency remained limited.

ii. Intelligibility and Naturalness

Intelligibility refers to how easily a listener can understand a speaker. Post-test recordings revealed that speech produced by the experimental group was more intelligible and closer to natural spoken English. Pupils began to use linking and weak forms spontaneously, even when not explicitly instructed to do so. This finding supports the view that intelligibility, rather than native-like pronunciation, should be the primary goal of pronunciation teaching (Gilbert, 2008). In contrast, the control group's speech remained heavily influenced by spelling, resulting in unnatural rhythm and stress patterns.

4. Comparative Analysis of Experimental and Control Groups

A comparison of post-test mean scores clearly shows that the experimental group outperformed the control group in both listening comprehension and oral production. The gains observed in the experimental group were significantly higher, indicating that connected speech instruction had a positive effect on pupils' communicative competence. These results

confirm that pronunciation instruction integrated into communicative activities is more effective than traditional approaches focusing solely on individual sounds (Richards, 2006). The findings also demonstrate that connected speech instruction benefits not only speaking skills but also listening comprehension, reinforcing the interdependent nature of these two skills.

5. Classroom Observation Findings

Classroom observations provided qualitative evidence supporting the quantitative results. During the instructional period, pupils in the experimental group became increasingly engaged and confident in oral activities. They participated more actively in role-plays, dialogues, and group discussions.

Observers noted that pupils began to:

Imitate natural speech patterns

Self-correct pronunciation during interaction

Show greater willingness to speak English

These behavioral changes suggest that connected speech instruction contributed to a more communicative classroom environment. Similar observations have been reported in studies emphasizing communicative pronunciation teaching (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). In contrast, pupils in the control group remained more hesitant during oral activities and relied heavily on teacher prompts.

6. Summary of Results

Overall, the results demonstrate that teaching connected speech as a didactic strategy significantly improves pupils' communicative competence. The experimental group showed notable gains in listening comprehension, fluency, intelligibility, and confidence in spoken English, while the control group showed limited progress. These findings provide strong empirical support for integrating connected speech instruction into secondary school English teaching in Goma and similar EFL contexts.

IV. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that teaching connected speech as a didactic strategy has a significant positive impact on pupils' communicative competence in secondary schools in Goma. This section interprets these results, discusses their implications, and situates them within the broader literature on pronunciation teaching and EFL instruction.

1. Improvement in Listening Comprehension

One of the most salient findings of the study is the notable improvement in listening comprehension among pupils in the experimental group. Before the intervention, learners struggled to understand spoken English, particularly in continuous speech contexts involving linked words, weak forms, and elision. After eight weeks of explicit connected speech instruction, experimental group pupils demonstrated a clear ability to decode these features in listening tasks. This improvement supports the claims of Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (2010), who argue that awareness of phonological processes in natural speech is essential for understanding spoken language. By focusing on connected speech, learners develop strategies to anticipate how words are linked and sounds are altered in fluent speech, reducing cognitive load during listening. Underhill (2005) similarly emphasizes that learners' difficulty with fast, natural speech is often attributable to lack of exposure and explicit instruction in connected speech phenomena. In contrast, the control group, which received traditional pronunciation instruction, showed only minor improvements. This reinforces previous research indicating that instruction focusing solely on individual sounds and word-level pronunciation has limited impact on listening comprehension (Kelly, 2000). These findings suggest that to enhance listening skills, EFL teaching must incorporate connected speech systematically.

2. Enhancement of Oral Fluency

The study also revealed substantial improvements in oral fluency among the experimental group. Pupils were able to produce longer, continuous stretches of speech with fewer unnatural pauses. This aligns with findings from Brown (2007), who notes that fluency is

closely tied to learners' familiarity with natural speech patterns, including rhythm, stress, and linking. By internalizing connected speech patterns, learners can speak more automatically, allowing cognitive resources to focus on content rather than decoding pronunciation at the word level. The control group, however, continued to exhibit halting, segmented speech. This observation confirms previous assertions that fluency cannot be fully achieved through mechanical repetition of isolated sounds without contextualized and communicative practice (Richards, 2006).

3. Intelligibility and Naturalness of Speech

Intelligibility is a core component of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). In this study, pupils exposed to connected speech instruction produced speech that was markedly more intelligible and natural. They employed linking, assimilation, and weak forms spontaneously in their oral output, demonstrating that explicit instruction not only raises awareness but also facilitates automatic application of these phonological processes. Gilbert (2008) emphasizes that intelligibility, rather than native-like pronunciation, should be the primary objective of pronunciation teaching. The results of this study support this perspective, showing that pupils do not need to mimic native speakers perfectly to communicate effectively; rather, understanding and producing connected speech patterns is sufficient to improve communication.

4. Classroom Engagement and Motivation

Classroom observations revealed increased participation and confidence among pupils in the experimental group. Learners became more willing to engage in oral activities, self-corrected errors, and interacted more actively with peers. These behavioral changes suggest that teaching connected speech not only improves linguistic competence but also enhances learners' affective engagement. Previous studies highlight the role of learner confidence and motivation in communicative competence (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). By providing pupils with tools to understand and produce natural speech, connected speech instruction may reduce anxiety related to speaking and foster a positive learning environment.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several important pedagogical implications: Curriculum Design: Connected speech should be systematically integrated into secondary school English curricula. While traditional pronunciation instruction addresses isolated sounds, it fails to prepare learners for authentic communication (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Teacher Training: English teachers require training in teaching connected speech explicitly. Without understanding phonological processes themselves, teachers may be unable to help learners acquire these skills effectively (Kelly, 2000). Instructional Methods: Lessons should combine explicit instruction with communicative practice. Activities such as role-plays, listening exercises, and dialogue repetition provide meaningful contexts in which learners can notice and use connected speech naturally. Assessment: Evaluation of communicative competence should include listening and speaking tasks that reflect natural speech, rather than focusing solely on written tests or isolated word pronunciation (Brown, 2007).

6. Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the principle that communicative competence encompasses more than grammatical knowledge. Hymes' (1972) framework of communicative competence emphasizes the ability to use language appropriately in context. The findings suggest that connected speech is a critical component of oral competence, bridging the gap between formal knowledge and effective communication. Moreover, the results support the pedagogical framework of communicative language teaching (CLT), which advocates for instruction grounded in authentic language use. Explicit attention to connected speech ensures that learners can understand and participate in real-life conversations, aligning instructional practice with CLT principles (Richards, 2006).

7. Limitations and Considerations

While the study demonstrates clear benefits of connected speech instruction, several limitations must be noted. First, the quasi-experimental design did not allow for random assignment, which may limit the generalizability of the findings (Creswell, 2014). Second,

the study focused on a relatively short instructional period (eight weeks), and long-term retention of connected speech features was not assessed. Future research should consider longitudinal designs and larger samples to confirm and extend these findings. Additionally, the study was conducted in a specific EFL context—secondary schools in Goma. While the results are likely relevant to similar contexts with limited English exposure, caution is advised when generalizing to settings with different linguistic environments.

8. Summary of Discussion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that teaching connected speech significantly enhances multiple dimensions of communicative competence, including listening comprehension, oral fluency, intelligibility, and learner confidence. Explicit instruction in connected speech provides learners with practical tools to navigate natural spoken English, thereby bridging the gap between classroom learning and authentic communication. The study underscores the importance of integrating connected speech into EFL instruction and highlights the need for teacher training, curriculum development, and assessment practices aligned with communicative competence principles. These insights contribute to the growing body of research advocating for phonological instruction that is both communicatively oriented and grounded in authentic speech patterns.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that explicit attention to connected speech can transform the way learners engage with English in secondary schools in Goma. By integrating features such as linking, assimilation, elision, and weak forms into instruction, pupils moved beyond mechanical pronunciation toward authentic communicative performance. The results show that connected speech is not a peripheral skill but a central component of listening and speaking competence. Beyond measurable gains in comprehension and fluency, the intervention fostered confidence and motivation. Pupils became more willing to participate, self-correct, and interact meaningfully in class. These affective outcomes underline the pedagogical value of connected speech: it bridges the gap between linguistic knowledge and communicative practice, creating a supportive environment where learners can thrive. The

findings also reinforce broader theoretical perspectives on communicative competence. Effective communication requires more than grammatical accuracy; it demands intelligibility, rhythm, and the ability to decode natural speech. Connected speech instruction thus positions learners to participate in authentic exchanges, preparing them for real-world interactions beyond the classroom. Finally, this research contributes to ongoing debates in language pedagogy by showing that connected speech instruction is both feasible and impactful in EFL contexts with limited exposure to natural English. It highlights the need for curricula that balance structural knowledge with oral performance, ensuring that learners are equipped not only to understand but also to be understood. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are proposed for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in the context of secondary school English teaching in Goma and similar EFL settings:

i. Integration of Connected Speech into Curriculum:

Secondary school English curricula should systematically incorporate connected speech instruction. Lessons should explicitly teach features such as linking, weak forms, assimilation, and elision, embedded within communicative activities rather than taught in isolation (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Kelly, 2000).

ii. Teacher Training and Professional Development:

English teachers should receive training on connected speech instruction and its role in developing communicative competence. Professional development workshops should focus on practical strategies for teaching connected speech in the classroom, including listening exercises, role-plays, and interactive drills (Richards, 2006).

iii. Communicative Teaching Methods:

Pronunciation and connected speech instruction should be taught using communicative methods rather than rote repetition. Activities should encourage active participation, imitation of natural speech, and peer interaction to reinforce learning and improve fluency (Brown, 2007).

iv. Assessment of Communicative Competence:

Evaluation should extend beyond written tests and isolated pronunciation tasks. Listening and speaking assessments should reflect natural speech patterns and measure learners' ability to comprehend and produce continuous, connected English (Gilbert, 2008).

In conclusion, teaching connected speech as a didactic strategy proves to be an effective approach for enhancing communicative competence among secondary school pupils in Goma. By integrating connected speech instruction into classroom practice, teachers can bridge the gap between formal language knowledge and authentic spoken communication, ultimately improving learners' fluency, intelligibility, and confidence in English. The study underscores the need for communicative, learner-centered approaches that reflect real-world language use, providing both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of EFL education.

Future Research:

Further research should investigate the long-term retention of connected speech features among EFL learners and examine the impact of such instruction across different age groups and proficiency levels. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how connected speech instruction influences overall communicative competence over time.

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