

## Activities for Teaching Reduced Speech

by *Sarita Z. Crawford* and *Heather L. Moffie*

### *Sh'wee teach'm* Reductions?

Listening in a second language is challenging enough, but when native English speakers use reductions, even basic speech can become unrecognizable to ELLs. Native English speakers use reductions in their speech all the time, but learners often fail to capture the meaning or even recognize it as reduced speech.

Aural puzzlement happens to native speakers as well. For example, in a recent staff meeting a native-English-speaking colleague was certain she'd heard a new employee introduce herself as the "Student Vomit Coordinator." Our colleague was so distracted, trying to figure out what the woman had really said, that she missed entirely the subsequent context of the introduction. Ah, yes. This was the new Student *Involvement* Coordinator. What important information had our friend missed while trying to figure out the new employee's title? The point is, our ELLs may miss even more important spoken content when distracted by commonly used reductions (i.e., *Whadja say?*), and the speaker may be completely unaware that even simple sentences do not make sense to the ELL listener.

To make matters more confusing, reductions now appear frequently in informal writing, such as social media, for example. Yet learners with academic and professional aspirations must be able to distinguish between the written reductions they see and the formal writing they are expected to produce.

Therefore, *weesh'd teach'm* reductions because learners hear them and because comprehending commonly reduced forms can spare ELLs a good deal of linguistic frustration. This article focuses on what reductions are, what learners need, plus some activities for recognizing and responding to commonly used reductions, as well as identifying informal vs formal written forms.

### *What'r* Reductions?

Like concentrated juices, reduced speech retains the most meaningful content, though some grammatical and phonological fluid has been removed. *Teaching Pronunciation* (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996) explains that "reduced speech... involve[s] unstressed vowels, omitted sounds, and other alternatives of the full form" (p. 230). Reduced forms often occur with other connected speech such as linking and assimilation (Brown & Kondo-Brown, 2006).

Reductions often involve:

**Function words** present for grammar and structure, such as:

- auxiliary verbs (*Whadja do?*)
- pronouns (help *'im*)
- conjunctions (this *'n* that)
- prepositions (good *o'* you to come)

(Note: main verbs are not usually reduced, lest meaning be lost; exceptions include verbs like *wanna* and reducing progressive *-ing* → *-in'* as in *doin'*)

## Unstressed syllables

**Vowel modification:** can → /kən/

**Consonant sounds** that are:

- missing: a lot of f → *lotta*, them/him → 'em
- radically changed: What are you → *Whatcha*

**Combinations** of the above:

In extreme cases of reductions and linking, phrases may be heard as new words:

When did you get here? → *Whenja get 'ere?*

Learners who hear “When did you get ear?” may think, “What a strange question. We are all born with ears.”

## Whad'da Learners Need?

### Learners Must Recognize Reductions

We consider reductions primarily a receptive skill and focus mainly on comprehension because:

- Reductions are prevalent in everyday spoken language, including educated, professional speech; learners have *gotta* understand 'em because they will hear 'em!
- ELLs are best understood when articulation is clearest, and they need never produce reductions to be understood (yet they frequently attempt to reduce their own speech—often with bewildering results).
- Learners must now decode both spoken and written reductions, increasingly prevalent in informal writing (e.g., social media).

Unless reductions and connected speech are taught specifically, learners are likely to miss, mishear, or misunderstand even familiar forms. For learners accustomed to carefully articulated ESL recordings of “shouldn’t have been,” hearing “*should’n’a’bin*” could easily be misinterpreted as a new word. To reduce such comprehension handicaps, ELLs need to recognize—and deserve to understand—just how “I am going to” could possibly become “I’m *gonna*” or even “*I’m’onna*” in spoken language.

### Wherd'ya Draw the Line?

When learning to recognize reductions, ELLs benefit from intentional instruction followed by ongoing comprehension practice. One technique for introducing a reduced form is to show, step by step, how the full form gets condensed into reduced speech.

In “*Wherd'ya* draw the line?”, teachers choose a common reduction like “I’m *gonna*,” ([click here for additional U.S. examples](#); PDF) and demonstrate its evolution from the most formal written form to the most reduced, informal, spoken form (See Figure 1; Moffie, 2012). Here’s how:

1. Start by writing the full form at the top of the board (e.g., “I am going to go.”)
2. On each line below it, rewrite it with any acceptable contractions (noting only one change per line).
3. On each succeeding line, rewrite it with each reduction or small pronunciation change (again, only one change per line).

4. When the form is fully reduced, ask students, “*Wherd’ya* draw the line?” In other words, where does the acceptable written form end and the informal reduction begin? (And introduce this common idiom, while you’re at it!).
5. Once ELLs discern the dividing line, draw a bold horizontal line separating what learners should write and speak (above the line) from what they will hear and need to understand (below the line).
6. Clearly indicate any transliterated reductions with a different color or italics (as we’ve done in this article). Then use this system consistently to reinforce what is acceptable in formal writing.
7. In future classes, use “*Wherd’ya* draw the line?” as a reference point: When reduced forms arise, ask learners, “Does that go above or below the line?” In other words, is the form mostly something they will hear and should understand or also something they can write and speak in any context?

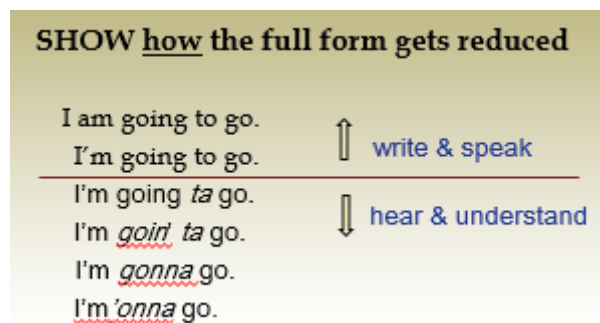


Figure 1. “*Wherd’ya* draw the line?” activity

Simple as this seems, we’ve seen students’ eyes open when using this technique, saying that while they had heard “I’m *gonna* go,” they never realized that it was the same as the “be going to” future tense they had learned in grammar class.

Additionally, activities like “*Wherd’ya* draw the line?” help learners distinguish between informal spoken English vs. standard written forms. Prior to texting and social media, it *couldabin* sufficient to teach learners only to recognize the spoken forms; however, ELLs now see reductions in informal writing on a daily basis. Learners also *needta* know what’s “acceptable,” particularly if they have academic and professional aspirations; assist them by clearly and consistently marking any unacceptable written forms.

## Practice Responding to Reductions

Learners need a lot of practice recognizing and responding to reductions. In addition to using dictations, poems, and songs that include reductions, we recommend the following game, “*Whatcha gonna* say?” (See Figure 2; created collaboratively at INTO CSU). To play this game, the teacher asks the questions orally, and at first only the multiple-choice answers are visible to the learners. This forces learners to listen carefully and process the reduction along with the rest of the question. If the student has difficulty, the written question may later be revealed, showing the full form of the reduction that was spoken.



## “Whatcha gonna say?” Game

1. *Haya doin’ today?* ← Question spoken by instructor
  - a. Great, thanks.
  - b. Haya is having tea.
  - c. I’m doing my HW.
  - d. Haya is fine.Response options a-d shown to learners
  
2. *Whadj’afta do ta come ta the U.S.?*
  - a. I had to get a ride from the airport.
  - b. You have to study here.
  - c. I had to get a visa.
  - d. After I came to the US, I went to LA.

Figure 2. “Whatcha gonna say?” game

The first, simple question in Figure 2 is intended for a lower level learner. The second, more complex structure is a sample question better suited for an advanced learner. As you can see, learners must understand the meaning of the reduced form in order to choose an appropriate answer to each spoken question.

### *T’sum Up*

When we teach ELLs to recognize, understand, and respond to reductions, their communication skills may be enhanced in several ways. Not only will they better comprehend reduced speech, but they also experience increased overall listening comprehension because they practice listening at a discourse level—beyond the mere form of the words they hear. This enables them to understand a wider variety of English speakers and typically results in greater conversational confidence, with smoother communication and more risk-taking. Finally, learners with the ability to draw the line between formal and informal written forms are better prepared for academic and professional English communication.

### References

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