

Heads up ESL - Native Speakers Don't Start Words with Vowels in Conversation

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Humans are lazy. They usually chose the most comfortable way of getting things done. This is especially true when North Americans speak English. The easiest way to talk is by starting words with consonants, then alternating consonant and vowel sounds. Regardless of how words are spelled or where printed word breaks occur, North Americans speak with the least amount of effort possible. Consequently, spoken English bears little resemblance to how it looks, and no matter how they look in print, most spoken English words actually start with a consonant, believe it or not.

The Impact of 'Lazy' Speech on ESL – Sharini's Story

My adult ESL class was filing out of the computer lab when a student turned to me and asked, "Teacher, what means *noff*?"

I said, "Sharini, there is no such word as *noff*," and asked her where she heard it.

"You, teacher. You say *noff*."

"I said *noff*?!" I was incredulous. "Do remember the sentence or when I said it?"

"Right now." She answered without hesitation.

"I just said *noff*? What did I say?"

"You say, 'Tur noff you compuda.'"

She was 100% correct. I did say *noff*! Who knew?

"Ah, yes." I looked down at my watch and shrugged my shoulders. "Unfortunately, we are out of time for today. We'll have to talk about *noff* tomorrow."

I had my work cut out for me. I had to figure out what was going on with *noff* by 9:00 a.m. the next day.

It turns out *noff* was not as complicated as I originally feared. *Noff* is a byproduct of a process called Linking. Linking is the three-part phenomenon where speaking flows independent of printed word breaks. It is incorrect to label linking as slurred or lazy speech because it is simply the most natural way for *speaking* to work.

A Lesson in Linking

Consonants are short sounds that 'stop' and *vowels* are elastic sounds that 'go' or stretch. The easiest and most natural way for human beings to speak is by alternating 'stop' and 'go' sounds, beginning with 'stop' sounds.

Many languages are constructed just this way – alternating consonants and vowels, starting with consonants. Look at the names of these countries.

CA NA DA, CHI NA, GER MA NY, PE RU, JA PAN, ME XI CO...

Of course – English is different.

Groups of Consonants

Written English includes thousands of words with consonant blends as found in **pl**ay or **li**st. Runs of three or four or more consonants are also common in English, for example **rlscl**, **gh**tsbr, **rch**str – although they are more easily recognized in their context: **Earls**cliffe, **Knights**bridge and **Church** Street. When speaking English, stopped sounds are pronounced consecutively with no difficulty at all.

Groups of Vowels

Pairs or short streams of vowels are also frequent in English. In words like **ple**ase, **fr**iend and **s**aid, pairs of vowels represent only one sound. In other vowel pairs like **p**oem, **l**ion, **re**act, each vowel makes an individual sound (which creates a new syllable). In **be**autiful, three vowels represent one sound, but in **ser**ious and **qui**et, three vowels make two. (There is no logic to this language.) Unlike consonant sounds, vowel sounds cannot be pronounced one after the other. Something amazing happens between vowel sounds; stay tuned.

Linking Happens in Three Predictable Places

Granted, sentences and phrases can start with vowel sounds, but the vast majority of words that begin with vowels occur inside sentences, where the three subconscious rules of ‘the easiest way to say it’ take over.

C/C - Consonant to Consonant Linking

When one word ends with the same consonant sound the next word starts with, the sound is pronounced only one time.

e.g. bus stop is pronounced /bu stop/

good day is pronounced /goo day/

C/V – Consonant to Vowel Linking

When a word ends with a consonant sound and the next word begins with a vowel sound, the consonant sound slips from the back of the first word to the front of the second.

e.g. turn off is pronounced /tur noff/

North America is pronounced /nor thamerica/

V/V – Vowel to Vowel Linking

When one word ends with a vowel sound and the next word begins with another vowel sound, a consonant (that is not printed) is automatically pronounced in between. Elastic sounds **cannot** be pronounced next to each other. Try it.

e.g. go away is pronounced /go waway/; poem sounds like /po wem/

I am is pronounced /I yam/; lion sounds like /li yon/

Native English speakers do not struggle consciously with these issues. Most have no idea they avoid starting words with vowels. They might even deny that they do it! English speakers learn vocabulary as distinct units for writing, then collapse those words wherever it is convenient when they talk. For non-native speakers, it is a different ball game.

The clumps of 'stop' or 'go' sounds in English, combined with Linking, present many special challenges for learners whose first language strictly alternates C/V or C/V/C. Very few of the words learners detect in conversation match vocabulary they have studied in school, nor can they find the words they hear, like *noff* or *waway* in the dictionary.

English might be the only language where the alphabet is unconnected to the sounds of the words, which renders some familiar suggestions ridiculous.

Sound it out: /Soun di dout/

Look it up in the dictionary: /loo ki du pin the dictionary/

Summary

Regardless of how English is written or who is aware of it, spoken English strives to follow the easy consonant/vowel flow of natural human speech. Linking is part of how English speaking works. With this information and a little practice, Sharini can decode *noff* on her own.

When native speakers learn they do not start words with vowels, they choose one of only two possible responses:

/Ye sIy do/ or /No wIy don't/

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