

A study of connected speech in English songs

Nghiên cứu hiện tượng nối âm trong các bài hát tiếng Anh

Tran Thi Minh Giang^{a*}, Nguyen Thi To Uyen^a
Trần Thị Minh Giang^{a*}, Nguyễn Thị Tố Uyên^a

^aFaculty of English, School of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences, Duy Tan University, Da Nang, 550000, Vietnam

^aKhoa Tiếng Anh, Trường Ngôn ngữ - Xã hội Nhân văn, Trường Đại học Duy Tân, Đà Nẵng, Việt Nam

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Abstract

The phenomena of assimilation, elision, and linking are complex features but play a significant role in understanding and developing learners' English listening and pronunciation skills. The study was conducted to help English-majored students practice and improve the use of the sound connection phenomenon in their English listening and speaking skills by listening to English songs. Therefore, the research objectives are to analyze the differences in the occurrence percentages of sound connection phenomena in 100 songs and to evaluate the English-majored students' ability to distinguish types of connected speech in songs. Additionally, the research methods used in this article include information collection, quantitative, and experimental methods. In addition, research data focus on three kinds of sound connection phenomena in 100 English songs and 20 sound connection recognition analyses of English-majored students participating in a Phonetics-Phonology class, course K27 at Duy Tan University. Lastly, the research results show a significant difference between the present rates of each type of connected speech in 100 songs and the English-majored students' ability to identify basic types of sound connections; however, there are still some limitations in analyzing the more complicated phenomena.

Keywords: connected speech; assimilation; elision; linking; English songs.

Tóm tắt

Hiện tượng đồng hóa, mất âm và nối âm là những đặc điểm âm thanh phức tạp nhưng đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc hiểu và phát triển kỹ năng nghe, phát âm tiếng Anh của người học. Bài nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm giúp các bạn sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh có thể rèn luyện và nâng cao việc sử dụng hiện tượng nối âm trong kỹ năng nghe và nói tiếng Anh thông qua việc nghe các bài hát Anh ngữ. Vì vậy, mục tiêu của bài nghiên cứu này là phân tích sự khác biệt về tỷ lệ xuất hiện của các hiện tượng nối âm trong 100 bài hát và đánh giá khả năng phân biệt các loại liên kết âm trong bài nhạc của sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh. Phương pháp nghiên cứu được sử dụng trong bài báo này bao gồm phương pháp thu thập thông tin, phương pháp định lượng và phương pháp thực nghiệm. Ngoài ra, dữ liệu nghiên cứu tập trung vào ba loại hiện tượng nối âm trong 100 bài hát Anh ngữ và 20 bài phân tích nhận dạng liên kết âm của các bạn sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh đang tham gia một lớp Ngữ âm-Âm vị học, khóa 27, Trường Đại học Duy Tân. Cuối cùng, kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy sự khác biệt đáng kể giữa tỷ lệ hiện diện của từng loại nối âm trong 100 bài nhạc và sinh viên có khả năng nhận biết các hiện tượng nối âm cơ bản. Tuy nhiên, các bạn vẫn còn một số hạn chế trong việc phân tích các hiện tượng phức tạp hơn.

Từ khóa: hiện tượng nối âm; đồng hóa âm; nuốt âm; nối âm; các bài hát tiếng Anh.

*Corresponding author: Tran Thi Minh Giang

Email: trantminhgiang@duytan.edu.vn

1. Introduction

Assimilation, elision, and linking are the phenomena characteristic of connected speech. These phenomena are important factors that significantly affect learners' ability to understand and develop English listening and pronunciation skills. The research concerns the definition and classifications of connected speech in English. In addition, with the frequencies appearing of those types of phenomena equally distributed among the music tracks, this article points out the consideration of applying music as a studying means to help students access and learn more about these sounds in connected speech. Due to repeated activities of listening and singing along with music, they instinctively attune their ears to the nuances of pronunciation and the fluidity of speech. This subconscious absorption of phonetic subtleties accelerates the acquisition process, rendering assimilation, elision, and linking phenomena more intuitive and less daunting. Learners can grasp the basic rules of connected speech most naturally and easily. By intertwining the rhythms of music with the cadences of speech, educators not only foster a learning environment that is both enriching and enjoyable but also empower students to navigate the intricacies of connected speech with confidence and fluency. Therefore, students can improve their listening skills, and their reflexes in communication will become more flexible.

1.1. Rationale

Connected speech phenomena in English have a significant impact on English listening and speaking skills because they create a difference between how words are pronounced clearly and how they are pronounced when joined together in conversation. In daily communication, native speakers often pronounce words seamlessly and quickly, which results in emphasizing, losing,

or linking sounds in words. Additionally, when sounds are linked, this can create more complex contexts than when words are pronounced independently. This makes understanding the meaning of a sentence or paragraph more complicated for learners, especially if they are unfamiliar with specific grammatical structures or vocabulary. In short, understanding and using the phenomenon of connecting sounds in English is an important part of developing English listening and speaking skills naturally and fluently.

1.2. Aims

The study was conducted to help English-major students practice and improve the use of the sound connection phenomenon in their English listening and speaking skills by listening to English songs.

1.3. Research questions

- What is the difference in the frequency of occurrence of the three types of consonants?
- What is the occurrence rate of each of the three types of consonants?
- What is the level of recognition of sound connection phenomena of language students in the Phonetics-Phonology class?

2. Review of previous studies related

There have been many research works on this topic in many different fields, such as Grant & Koch [3], Shaffer [10], Nipattamanon [7], and Ngoan & Giang [6].

According to Grant & Koch [3], the author of an empirical study demonstrates positive effects on second language acquisition. In addition, further research into the cognitive and affective advantages of music and songs need to be studied, especially left-brain-right brain theory and the relationship between musical ability and language aptitude. In the research accomplished by Shaffer [10], after reviewing the study's

results, the author concluded that song-based language learning can be a very effective English language teaching technique. The research also discovers that an area called Broca in the brain is a language processing area involved in voice generation, especially evaluating the characteristics of words while listening and understanding the complexity of the structure. Next, Nipattamanon [7] finds out that weekly listening to English songs gradually develops learners' pronunciation of assimilation, separating, reducing vowels, entering, reducing, and linking sounds. The research also proposes that music teaching techniques should be a part of the education for students. Last but not least, Ngoan and Giang [6] comment on the importance of phonology, especially aspects of connected speech, in foreign language teaching and learning.

After referring to all the previous research works above, we can see that English teaching and learning through songs has been subject to examination along the line of learners' perception. That means that how foreign learners learn English through songs and how they realize connected speech is hugely important and necessary. However, among the previous research literature, very few studies have investigated the relationship between songs and sound connection phenomena. Thus, it is a new point of the research.

3. Action research

3.1. Research participants

Research object: The phenomenon of English sound connection in 100 English songs (concepts, roles, and subtypes) and the experiment in a Phonetics-Phonology class at Duy Tan University.

Research subjects: 20 students majoring in English, course K27 at Duy Tan University for the experiment.

3.2. Research methods

- *Information collection method:* search and synthesize general and important knowledge of connected speech.

- *Quantitative research method:* analyze, synthesize, and process the collected data through an Excel file.

- *Experimental method:* conduct an experiment using music in the school curriculum for some students who have studied the Phonetics-Phonology class.

3.3. Data collection

- First, in terms of analyzing the connected speech in songs, 100 popular English songs are selected to analyze and classify the types of connected speech phenomena appearing in those songs. All results are stored in an Excel file, and quantitative methods are used to synthesize and calculate the number and percentage of occurrence of different types of connected speech.

- Next, for the experiment, the lecturer of the Phonetics-Phonology class will select and provide 20 English songs for the English-major students participating in the class. Students will independently identify, classify, and synthesize the sound connection phenomena in those songs. After synthesizing all the analyses, the author reviews, compares, and calculates the ratio of the difference between the students' results and the specific results provided by the lecturer.

4. Connected speech

4.1. Definition

Connected speech, also known as the phenomenon of connecting sounds, is one of the basic features of English pronunciation. The definition of this phenomenon has been studied in many research works by many authors, such as Crystal [2, 101], Hieke [4, 41], Pinker [8, 159–

160], etc. However, this study will focus on the connected speech definition in Martin's research [5, 15].

“Connected speech is more than just a string of individual target segments joined together in series, since each segment is liable to influence the segments that surround it. The precise form that these influences take is determined by the particular language in question, and so the phonology of connected speech is part of the phonology of the language that the child has to master”.

4.2. The role of connected speech

The use of connected speech saves speakers' effort and decreases the amount of time it takes to speak a sentence. Furthermore, by omitting a few sounds, difficult pronunciation sequences can be handled easily. Connected speech also *“promotes the regularity of English rhythm by compressing syllables between stressed elements and facilitating their pronunciation so that regular speech can be maintained”* Clark, Fletcher & Yallop [1, 11].

4.3. Classifications of connected speech

The knowledge about concepts and subtypes of negative connections will be analyzed and synthesized based on the book by Roach [9].

- **Assimilation:** the process by which sounds in different words change when combined during speaking, being transformed to be more similar to the sounds around them is called assimilation.

There are 3 types of assimilation:

- + Assimilation of voice: eg: I have to /aɪ hæv tu:/ → /aɪ hæf tu:/
- + Assimilation of place: eg: that /ðæt/ + boy /bɔɪ/ → /ðæp bɔɪ/
- + Assimilation of manner: eg: that soap /ðæt səʊp/ → /ðæs səʊp/

- **Elision:** in phonetics and phonology, the elision phenomenon is the omission of one or more sounds (can be vowels, consonants or entire syllables) in a word or phrase to make pronunciation easier than.

There are 4 types of swallowing sounds:

- + Getting rid of weak vowels after /p, t, k/ sounds: eg: potato /pə'teɪtəʊ/ → /p^h'teɪtəʊ/
- + Discarding weak vowels before the sounds /n, l, r/: eg: tonight /tə'naɪt/ → /t'naɪt/
- + Eliminating sounds in complex consonant clusters: eg: looked back /lʊkt bæk/ → /lʊk bæk/
- + Removing the final sound /v/ in the sound cluster 'of' /əv/ before consonants

- **Linking:** in English, linking sound is the phenomenon in which words in a sentence are connected to each other during speaking, making the sentence more seamless and easier to speak.

There are 4 types of negative connections:

- + Link the last consonant with the first vowel
Eg: Daniel Ask, your new book is a collection of articles about people.

/ˈdænjələ:sk jə:(r) nju: bʊkɪzə kə'leɪʃnəvɑ:tɪklə'baʊt 'pi:pl/

- + Use the connection /w/ between the final sounds /u:/, /əʊ/ or /aʊ/ and the first vowel

Eg: Have you ever met anyone famous?

/hæv ju: wevə(r) met 'eniwʌn 'feɪməs?/

- + Use the connection /r/ between the final sounds /ɜ:/, /ə/, /ɔ:/ or /eə/ and the first vowel

Eg: Where are my glasses? They're over there on the table.

/weərə(r) maɪ glɑ:sɪz? ðeərəʊvə(r) ðeərɒn ðə 'teɪbl/

- + Use the connection /j/ between the final sounds /i/, /i:/ and the first vowels

Eg: It's about telly addicts.

/ɪts ə'baʊt 'teli jædɪkts/

5. Results of the research

5.1. General result of connected speech

5.1.1. Frequency of occurrence of sound connection phenomena in 100 English songs

Songs often reflect everyday communication rather than academic language. In addition, listening to and learning from songs can help learners improve their ability to recognize and

use different types of sound connections naturally in real-life communication. This can create an exciting and productive learning environment. Therefore, learning about the frequency of sound connections in songs helps learners gain access to how native speakers speak and communicate, thereby improving their listening and speaking skills.

Table 1. The distribution of three types of connected speech in 100 English songs

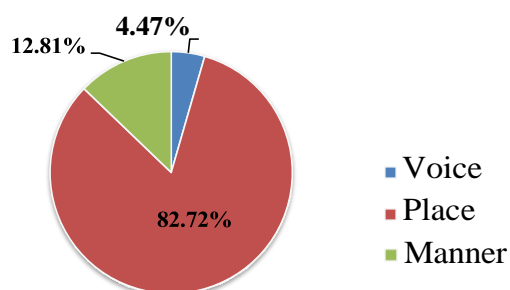
Types	Total number of occurrences	Percentage
Assimilation	1366	17.89%
Elision	2756	36.10%
Linking	3513	46.01%
TOTAL	7635	100%

Based on the data presented in the chart, it is evident that there are notable disparities in the occurrence rates of various types of connected speech. The most prevalent phenomenon is linking, constituting 46.01% of the total, followed by elision at 36.1% and assimilation at 17.89%.

Among these, the rule governing the linkage of the final consonant with the initial vowel stands out as one of the simplest techniques to grasp and apply, frequently manifesting in everyday conversational sentences. Following closely behind is the phenomenon of elision, characterized by the absorption of complex consonants within words or phrases.

5.1.2. Frequency of occurrence of each subcategory in 100 English songs

- Subcategories of Assimilation:



In contrast, English assimilation in the chart, occupies a relatively smaller portion. This is attributed to the intricate nature of its underlying theories and regulations, limiting its occurrence to specific contexts. Consequently, the diversity in the distribution of connected speech phenomena is evident, particularly in English songs, underscoring their value as effective tools for students to acquaint themselves with and enhance their comprehension of these phonetic linking processes.

There are the particular results of the distribution of each subcategory of each connected speech type presented below.

Figure 1. The distribution of three types of subcategories of assimilation in 100 English songs

The disparity in percentages among the various subcategories of assimilation is significant. Specifically, when considering the amalgamation of voice assimilation (4.47%) and manner assimilation (12.81%), the total barely

reaches half a percent, contrasting starkly with the overwhelming prevalence of place assimilation (82.72%). This data underscores the prominence of place assimilation in song lyrics, highlighting its widespread occurrence and popularity within linguistic contexts.

- Subcategories of Elision:

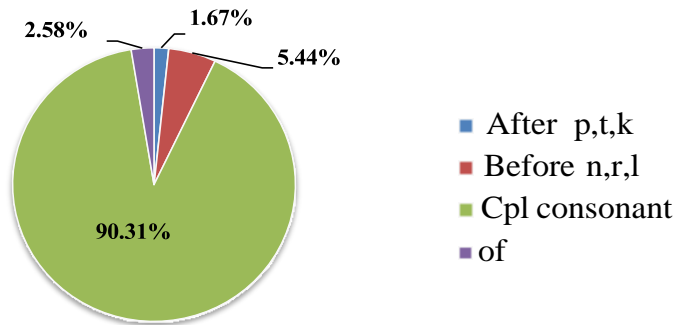


Figure 2. The distribution of four types of subcategories of elision in 100 English songs

In the spoken language of native speakers, complex consonant clusters are discarded frequently. It is proven that the elision among complex consonants, which had the highest application rate (90.31%) in Figure 5.2, emerged as the dominant kind. On the contrary, the three remaining types only make up a small

percentage. The weak vowel elision before the consonants /n/, /l/, and /r/ accounts for only 5.44%. Next is rejecting the last syllable /v/ in the word 'of' before the consonant, which accounts for a percentage of 2.58. Finally, the elision of the weak vowel after the vowels /p/, /t/, and /l/ is rare in songs, with a prevalence of only 1.67%.

- Subcategories of Linking:

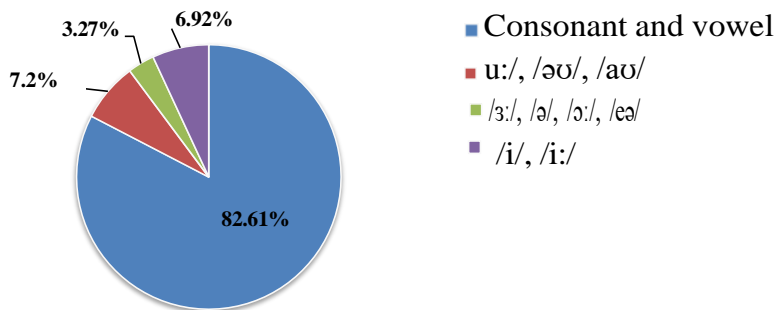


Figure 3. The distribution of four types of subcategories of linking in 100 English songs

In general overview, according to Figure 4.3, the linking's subcategories also have huge differences in frequency of occurrence. The highest percentage is the association of final consonants with beginning vowel words, namely 82.61%. In contrast, linking the final sounds /u:/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/ and /i/, /i:/ with words beginning with vowels appears very little in the songs,

respectively 7.2% and 6.92%. Lastly, linking the ending sounds /ɜ:/, /ə/, /ɔ:/ or /eə/ with the beginning vowels only accounts for 3.27%. Although some subcategories make up just a few small percentages in the figure, it does not mean that they do not appear in the communication culture of indigenous people.

Regarding the overview of the research results, readers can understand that all three genres of assimilation, elision, and linking appear and account for a certain percentage more or less in English songs. They all take turns creating smooth, fluid strings. We also see that native speakers use three types of connected speech with great frequency in their lyrics as well as in their daily conversation. However, the difference in data between these three categories is relatively huge.

5.2. Results of the experiment

This experiment investigates students' awareness level of sound connection phenomena in songs implemented in a Phonetics-Phonology class, Faculty of English at Duy Tan University. However, this experiment only investigated the ability to identify and analyze sound connection phenomena in songs of 20 language students participating in a Phonetics-Phonology class. The reason for this experiment is that besides obstacles related to vocabulary and grammar, connecting sounds is also an immense challenge that significantly affects students' listening and communication abilities in communications with native speakers.

Table 2. Frequency of appearance of three types of sound connections in 20 English songs of English-majored students and the lecturer of the Phonetics-Phonology class

Results	Assimilation		Elision		Linking	
	Quantity	Percentage	Quantity	Percentage	Quantity	Percentage
Results of students	146	46.35%	425	64.89%	613	77.79%
Results of lecturer	315	100%	655	100%	788	100%

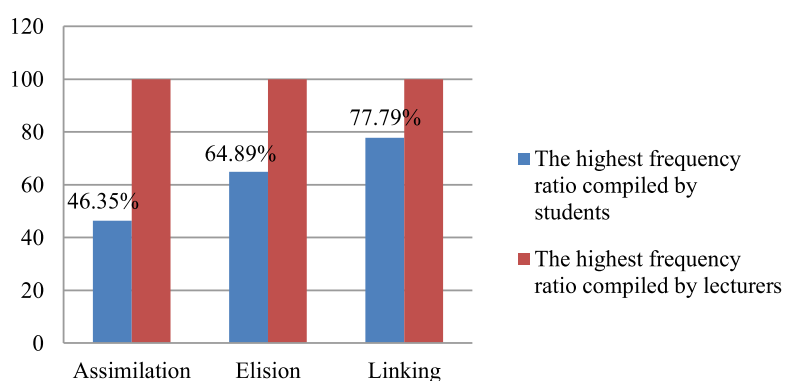


Figure 4. Highest frequency percentage compiled by students and the lecturer in 20 songs

According to the above data, readers can see that English-majored students have relatively understood and recognized all three types of connected speech existing in musical lyrics. It is easily found that the process of connecting consonants and vowels is the most recognizable and also most frequently occurring process. The highest frequency of this phenomenon that students analyzed and synthesized was 613

times. Regarding the elision process, their frequency is lower than the frequency of the linking. Students can recognize the rule to swallow complex consonants in words and phrases with 425 appearing times in 20 songs. However, the difference between these two phenomena is not too significant. It states that students can understand and grasp the basic knowledge of the two phenomena of sound

elision and linking; simultaneously, they have the ability to apply these two subtypes to practice listening and speaking skills. With the lowest percentage of 146 occurrences, assimilation is a phenomenon that was rarely noticed in musical lyrics. However, although the knowledge about this type of connection is complicated, students can still recognize some changes of this subtype in sentences, mainly assimilation of manner.

Besides, a notable point here is that the results of students and lecturers are greatly different. As shown in the table and figure, the results of the lecturer's analysis have higher frequencies of connected speech than the students'. During the analytical process of the students' results in the Phonetics-Phonology class, the lecturer noticed that there were many cases in which students did not realize the existence of some types of sound assimilation, elision, and linking in the lyrics. In addition, there are also some cases in which students correctly identify phrases with changes but incorrectly classify the connected speech's types of phenomenon.

Specifically, in the classification of sound assimilation, students rarely discover the phenomenon of place and voice because of the complexity of their concepts and rules. They only determined 46.35% occurrence compared to the results of the lecturer. Regarding the classification of the sound elision phenomenon, this phenomenon accounts for 64.89%, a difference of 35.11% from the rate compiled by the lecturer. Although it is still possible to recognize some of its fundamental subcategories, students are still limited in finding weak sound disappearances after aspirated sounds. Finally, linking is the simplest phenomenon among the three types of connected speech; however, students still encounter difficulties using connections between the last and first vowels. The total percentage that

students synthesized is only 77.79% of the total 100% of the lecturer's result. Indeed, we can notice that there are still some sound connection rules that students cannot remember or understand clearly. The reason may stem from the large amount and complex of connected speech knowledge that students hardly remember; on the other hand, the lyrics are too fast to recognize, or the phenomena have some similarities, leading to students being unable to differentiate. Therefore, readers can understand that even though they are English-majored students, it does not mean they can understand and recognize all the complex types of English connected speech. Besides, readers can also see the disadvantages of applying this method of learning English through songs in the school curriculum.

6. Conclusion

Based on the research results, we were able to complete the research questions.

First, the frequency of occurrence of different types of consonants in English songs varies significantly. The linking phenomenon of connected speech is more common than the other two phenomena which are assimilation and elision.

Next, in 100 English songs, each subtype of assimilation, swallowing, and connecting is also clearly analyzed and synthesized, and the results are relatively different. Research results show that positional assimilation, swallowing complex consonants, and linking final consonants with first vowels are the most frequently used types in native speakers' speech.

Finally, the students' ability to recognize the phenomenon of connecting sounds is relatively good. Students have recognized and understood the basic rules of three types of connected speech existing in song lyrics. However, there is still a great difference in students' results

compared to the lecturer's results. The results show that students' recognition ability is still limited by more complex rules.

6.1. Suggestions

The study proposes several innovative methods aimed at enhancing proficiency in English sound connection phenomena through the integration of music into the learning process. By leveraging the universal appeal and rhythmic nature of music, these techniques offer an engaging platform for students to immerse themselves in the intricacies of English pronunciation and phonetics. The overarching goal of these suggestions is to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural nuances inherent in English communication, thereby equipping English-major students at Duy Tan University with the necessary tools to thrive in diverse linguistic environments. Here are a few tailored recommendations to facilitate this transformative journey:

Choose songs with clear pronunciation: Choosing songs with unambiguous lyrics and standard pronunciation helps learners hear and recognize sounds and pronunciation patterns effortlessly.

Focus on each part of the song: Learners can break the song into short segments and focus on each part to recognize and practice the phenomena of sound assimilation, sound swallowing, and sound connection.

Repeat and practice many times: Repeating musical passages and lyrics numerous times can help learners become familiar with pronunciation patterns and improve their ability to recognize related phenomena.

Use subtitles and text: Providing subtitles or text of the song can help learners follow and better understand how words and sounds are put together.

Practice singing along with the song: Trying to imitate the singer's pronunciation supports students improve their listening and pronunciation.

Analysis and discussion: After learning a piece of music, learners can perform activities to analyze and discuss the phenomena of assimilation, elision, and linking in that piece of music which helps them understand better.

Record and compare: Record yourself singing and then compare it with the original version of the song to identify and improve your weaknesses.

Create curriculum and lesson materials that focus on common types of connections: Choose songs that contain connection phenomena, such as assimilation, elision, and linking, for use in lectures and learning materials, then analyze the lyrics and guide students to recognize and practice the sound connection phenomena in each song.

Organize activities to analyze and discuss sound connection phenomena in songs: Create practice exercises to recognize and classify sound connection phenomena in English songs.

6.2. Limitation and other further researches

6.2.1. Limitation

This study only focuses on the fundamental characteristics of assimilation, elision, and linking and their subcategories. In addition, the distribution of connected speech classifications was only performed and analyzed in 100 English songs; besides, English-major students only practiced recognizing three kinds of sound connections in 20 English songs.

6.2.2. Other further researches

Based on the restrictions, several developing directions for the upcoming work that needs to be carried out in this category are as follows:

Studying the characteristics of connected speech in the communication of English language learners.

Researching the difficulties in applying the basic knowledge of connected speech in learning to listen and communicate in English for English learners.

Researching on the effectiveness of learning connected speech through English songs.

- Studying how proficiency in English sound connection phenomena can be enhanced through the integration of music into the learning process

The following is a list of 20 English songs recommended to provide students with a reliable reference source for practicing connected speech and developing their listening and pronouncing skills.

Order	Songs -Singers	Retrieved from the links
1	“Lover” - Taylor Swift	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMtN4sOvhqY&ab_channel=ShadowMusic
2	“See you again” - Wiz Khalifa ft. Charlie Puth	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPyovQwFmhE&ab_channel=SuperbLyrics
3	“Hello Vietnam” – Pham Quynh Anh	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwOY1o16T4s
4	“Perfect” – Ed Sheeran	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPhpHvnnn0Q&ab_channel=7clouds
5	“Sugar”- Maroon 5	https://youtu.be/N1BcpzPGIYQ
6	“Like my father” - JAX	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zm7RKSZCG5E
7	“The nights” - Avicii	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfF6Jey8yb4
8	“Say you won’t let go” - James Arthur	https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jamesarthur/sayyouwontletgo.html
9	“Señorita” – Shawn Mendes, Camila Cabello	https://youtu.be/Pkh8UtuejGw
10	“Count on me” -Bruno mars	https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brunomars/countonme.html
11	“Just Give Me a Reason” - Pink, Nate Ruess	https://youtu.be/D9zBcIzPCeQ
12	“Comethru” - Jeremy Zucker	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jO2viLEW-1A
13	“Nothing's gonna change my love for you” - Westlife	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkupD1q5BPo&ab_channel=Th%C3%A0nhNguy%E1%BB%85n

Order	Songs -Singers	Retrieved from the links
14	“Payphone” - Maroon 5 Ft. Wiz Khalifa	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12gmxEFeBo&ab_channel=LyricsArt
15	“Love Story” - Taylor Swift	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZy52XKyE3U&ab_channel=FallInLuv
16	“Like I’m gonna lose you” - Meghan Trainor	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39-M0i0sOHE&ab_channel=DopeLyrics
17	“2002” - Anne-Marie	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53j7p6Sg5s8
18	“Paris in the Rain” - Lauv	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7xXQUJrLq0
19	“Girls like you” – Maroon 5	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lZ2AFZR6IU&ab_channel=7clouds
20	“Blinding lights” - The Weekend	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwxLwG2_Sxx&ab_channel=7clouds

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