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Weak Forms

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Course: Phonetics and Phonology

Level: Second Year

2026-2025

1 .Introduction

In English, many function words have weak forms, which are shortened, unstressed pronunciations often with vowel reduction.

Weak forms are essential for:

- Natural connected speech
- Rhythm and fluency
- Understanding and being understood in conversation

This chapter covers:

- Definition of weak forms
- Function vs content words
- Common weak forms in English
- Rules for using weak forms
- Practice exercises

2 .Function Words vs Content Words

- Function words: articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions, pronouns
→ usually weak
- Examples: and, to, of, for, the, you, can
- Content words: nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs → usually strong
- Examples: cat, happy, run, quickly

Tip: Students should recognize which words can have weak forms in speech.

3 .Features of Weak Forms

- Reduced vowel, usually /ə/, /ɪ/, or /ʊ/
- Shorter duration
- Often unstressed
- Occur in fast or casual speech

Example:

- and → /ænd/ (strong) or /ən/ (weak)
- to → /tu:/ (strong) or /tə/ (weak)
- for → /fɔ:/ (strong) or /fə/ (weak)

4 .Common Weak Forms of Function Words

4.1 Articles

- the → /ðə/ (before consonant), /ði/ (before vowel, strong form)

4.2 Prepositions

- to → /tə/ (weak), /tu:/ (strong)
- of → /əv/ (weak), /ɒv/ (strong)
- for → /fə/ (weak), /fɔ:/ (strong)

4.3 Conjunctions

- and → /ən/ (weak), /ænd/ (strong)
- but → /bət/ (weak), /bʌt/ (strong)

4.4 Auxiliary Verbs

- can → /kən/ (weak), /kæn/ (strong)
- have → /həv/ (weak), /hæv/ (strong)

4.5 Pronouns

- you → /jə/ (weak), /ju:/ (strong)
- him → /ɪm/ (weak), /hɪm/ (strong)

5 .Rules for Using Weak Forms

.1 Weak forms usually appear in unstressed syllables

.2 Strong forms are used:

- For emphasis → I want TO go (stress “to”)
- At the end of a sentence → Can you do it?

4-Weak forms often blend with neighboring words, creating connected speech

Example:

I want to go → /aɪ wɒnt tə ɡəʊ/

- I want TO go (emphasis) → /aɪ wɒnt tu: ɡəʊ/

6 .Vowel Reduction in Weak Forms

- Most common reduced vowel: schwa /ə/
- Others: /ɪ/ as in to → /tə/, /ʊ/ as in could → /kʊd/

Example:

- He can do it → /hi: kən dʊ ɪt/
- I have to go → /aɪ hæv tə ɡəʊ/

Tip: Highlight natural rhythm and unstressed syllable shortening.

7 .Minimal Pair / Practice Examples

- and → /ænd/ (strong) vs /ən/ (weak)
- to → /tu:/ (strong) vs /tə/ (weak)
- of → /ɒv/ (strong) vs /əv/ (weak)
- can → /kæn/ (strong) vs /kən/ (weak)

Exercise: Students read sentences emphasizing weak forms:

-I want to go to the cinema.

/ → aɪ wɒnt tə ɡəʊ tə ðə 'sɪn.ə.mə/

- He can do it and finish on time.

/ → hi: kən dʊ ɪt ən 'fɪn.ɪʃ ɒn taɪm/

8 .Teaching Tips

-Highlight weak forms in text before reading aloud

- Model natural connected speech
- Use listening exercises to identify weak forms in conversation
- Practice vowel reduction and syllable shortening
- Blend words in phrases: going to → /'gəʊɪŋ tə/

9 .Summary

- Weak forms are unstressed, reduced pronunciations of function words
- Most common reduced vowel: schwa /ə/
- Weak forms create natural rhythm and connected speech
- Strong forms are used for emphasis or clarity
- Teaching weak forms improves fluency, intelligibility, and natural speech