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All About the American Flap

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A Warm wELLcome for Language Learners

Kristin Lems

About This Column

In this column, I am going to talk about the American flap, a phonological feature of the American English dialect. Those of us with backgrounds in ESL/EFL learn about this in our master's programs, but I have found that even teachers who have taken a course in linguistics may not be aware of the flap and its important implications for listening, reading, and spelling in English (Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2017).

All About the American Flap

What Is It?

The American flap can be described as the sound made when the tip of the tongue lightly touches the roof of the mouth as we say a word that contains it. Because the tongue bounces quickly off the soft palette, many refer to it as a *flap*.

The flap is commonly seen in two syllable words in which the first syllable is stressed and ends with a vowel or an "r," and the second syllable begins with the letters "t," "tt," "d," or "dd" and is followed by a vowel sound. Here are examples of some common words that use the flap:

waiting	reading	letter	writing	party
wider	better	dirty	didn't	little
item	city	bottle	thirty	later

You may have already noticed that these words can be the source of spelling problems not only for English language learners but for native English speakers. That is because the letters do not "sound" like other words in which these letters appear.

In addition to common words like those above, there are other places we find the flap: in longer words when the last syllable begins with one of those letters or between words when the

first of the words ends with one of the letters. Here are examples of each:

Longer Words

ability elevator president
alligator comedy

Between Two Words

a lot of get over not only itis didit
saidit ArtInstitute

Between Two Words, When the "h" Sound of Him or Her Is Muted:

told [h]im got [h]er paper
wrote [h]im a letter

Also, Between Two Words When the "th" Is Muted for the Word Them in Fast Speech:

get [th]em hid [th]em

There Are Even Cases of Several Flaps in a Row, in Particular Word Combinations:

not at all put it in
wateredit a little (4 flaps!)

There are two interesting exceptions to the application of the flap sound. The first consists of words that seem to meet the criteria for a flap but end with the syllable -en/-in/-ain. Examples of this are *kitten*, *harden*, *Britain*, *sodden*, *whiten*, *eaten*, and even *rootin-tootin*. These look like they should use a flap, but they do not (unless

you happen to be Australian). This is because, in the American dialect, the last syllable is called a “syllabic” syllable; we change its pronunciation into either a stop and a nasal sound (with the “r” words) or just a nasal sound (with the “d” words) in which we hold the tongue against the roof of our mouth making the sound *n*. This particular feature varies among different national dialects of English, but we normally pronounce these words with syllabic syllables in American English. So . . . no flap for these!

The second exception should be especially interesting to teachers of Kindergarten through 3rd grade because it connects closely to a common spelling error. Words that have an “n” instead of an “r” at the end of a first stressed syllable often sound like they have a flap such as the words *center*, *ponder*, *renting*, and *landing*. The reason for this is that the American English consonant “r”—which can precede a flap—and the letter “n” are both classified as “liquids.” We can say these consonants while pronouncing a vowel without modification from other parts of the mouth. In fact, we can’t say them without a vowel! If you have ever taken singing lessons, you know that these are the consonants we use when we practice singing because they are so resonant—the vowel sound passes right through them, flowing like a “liquid.” (The other liquids in American English are the sounds *m*, *l*, and *ng*.) If you are teaching children to spell in English, you have probably noticed that they often omit these consonant letters when the letters are in the middle of the word. This is because kids hear the vowel sound, but they do not think the consonant that the vowel passes through needs a letter of its own. That is a common miscue with liquid consonants.

You may have already realized these things through your teacher preparation coursework or through professional development for using programs like *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnson, 2008), the Orton Gillingham method (Orton, 1976), or the Heggerty phonemic awareness and phonics

materials (Heggerty, 2005). However, you may not have known the linguistic reasons behind these spelling phenomena—and now you do!

The Flap and Homophones

Another big effect of the American flap, on both reading and spelling, is that it is responsible for a preponderance of homophones. Homophones, of course, are pairs of words that sound alike but have different meanings and spellings. Because so many English words differ only in the spelling of the letters *t/tt* and *d/dd*, the flap is responsible for many homophones. Here are just a few:

waited	waded	fated	faded
wetting	wedding	plotted	plodded
latter	ladder	meddle	metal
writing	riding	traitor	trader
raided	rated	seated	seeded

There are even three-way homophones caused by the flap:

sided	sighted	sited
petal	peddle	pedal

At this point, you may be saying to yourself, “Well, I don’t pronounce them the same way! That is just casual—lazy—speech. I make sure to say them very clearly when I show these words to the children.” That’s because you are a teacher, and you are responding, even if unconsciously, to your knowledge that students may have trouble distinguishing these words. You may not have known, however, that it was because of the flap. In truth, however, when we are conversing in connected speech, rather than saying a word in isolation for a spelling or vocabulary lesson, we do pronounce these homophone pairs the same way. It is context, not different pronunciations, that clears these up for listeners.

The Flap and English Language Learners

There are two main ways in which the flap has an impact on ELLs: (1) spelling and (2) listening comprehension. The first, spelling, is more likely to impact younger learners, whereas listening comprehension is more likely to affect adults. Of course, this is a generality, and it is possible any age group may benefit from practice in both of these areas.

The Flap and Spelling

The American flap affects how ELLs learn to spell words in English as a new language. Around 70% of ELLs in the country speak Spanish as a first language, and the effect of the flap on these students' early spelling development is very significant.

As has been shown here, the flap sound appears in certain contexts and is associated with particular letters in the American dialect: “t,” “tt,” “d,” or “dd.” Because the same sound can be spelled four different ways in English, native English speakers as well as ELLs often use the wrong spelling to represent the flap sound such as “potado” for “potato” or “lader” for “later.” However, there is a common spelling miscue that is particular to native speakers of Spanish because the flap sound maps onto a completely different letter in Spanish: the letter “r.”

Here are some common Spanish words which contain the letter “r” after an initial vowel and have the same sound as the American flap: *arena*, *ahora*, *manera*, *era*, and *oracion*. Because the flap sound is represented by the letter “r” in Spanish, it means that when L1 Spanish speakers are trying to spell words in English, they often use the letter “r” to spell English words that have the flap. They hear the flap sound just fine, but they represent the sound with the Spanish letter “r.” That’s why you may see words like “siri” for “city,” “diren” for “didn’t,” and “byurifu” for “beautiful.” These L1 Spanish

ELLs are simply transcribing English words according to the Spanish sound-letter associations they have already made. These miscues do not indicate a hearing impairment, dyslexia, or a cognitive deficit—in fact, they are a positive sign of emergent biliteracy because these students have already learned a sound-letter combination in Spanish! Far from raising red flags, such miscues should reassure us that these learners have already gained the understanding that sounds are represented by letters in arbitrary relationships. They simply have not learned the relationship between the American flap and its English spelling patterns. It takes some time for ELLs to learn this, just as it does for native English speakers, because the flap has so many spelling variations.

The Flap and Listening Comprehension for Adult ELLs

For a decade before I began teaching teachers, I taught beginning level ESL to adult immigrants. These new immigrants worked as much as 70 hours per week but still managed to come to class Friday evenings, Saturday mornings, and five hours on Sunday. I always looked forward to the day that I would teach the flap—and perhaps because it was often on a Sunday morning, it seemed like a “Hallelujah” kind of day! Even if these learners had studied English before coming to the United States, very few knew about the American flap. As a result, they encountered tremendous difficulties in listening comprehension. Common, simple words, such as *party* or *city* were incomprehensible; they would hear the words and imagine how they thought the words would be spelled. In their minds, those words were not spelled with the letters used for the flap, but probably with the letter “r.” Therefore, they were completely unrecognizable!

Once I introduced the flap sound and provided examples of common words, repeating the words as I wrote them on the board, faces

would light up with delight. Students would say, “Oh, so that’s the word I kept hearing! I know that word!” or “Now I know what they’re saying!” Sometimes we would also repeat the words to practice the pronunciation of the American flap, but I always kept the focus on listening comprehension, not pronunciation, for two reasons: (1) Adult learners often speak with an accent because the age by which one can speak a new language accent-free had already passed (Bialystok, 1997); and (2) more importantly, saying an English flap word without the flap does not really make the word unintelligible—after all, the flap is in the middle of the word, and it can usually be figured out from context. It simply indicates that the learner has had limited conversation practice in spoken American English.

When adult learners move into situations in which English is spoken regularly, it is likely they will begin to adapt their pronunciation of flap words—at least the ones used often. However, it is critically important to unlock listening comprehension, explaining the rule and offering numerous examples of it. Once my students learned how a flap might be represented in spoken language, they would often come in with new words they had suddenly been able to understand for the first time. Needless to say, it was heartwarming for me.

Ideas for the Classroom

One way to practice recognizing the flap is by using a short, prerecorded passage from the news, a podcast, or a song, creating a cloze (fill in the blank) exercise which omits only the words with the flap, and asking the learners to fill in the missing words. That’s a great, focused way to practice understanding the flap in spoken form.

For younger students who are new learners of English, a combination listening/spelling activity might consist of a spelling mini-lesson in which you show and then practice flap words

with the same spelling pattern. For example, you could focus on five flap words that have the “t” spelling. This helps students focus on each kind of spelling pattern before you mix together flap words with different spellings. Below is a list of 25 common two-syllable words using the flap, each with one of the different spelling patterns, that you might use as a starter:

(t)	(d)	(tt)	(dd)	(r+t/d/)
waited	reading	letter	bedded	party
meter	wider	patter	kidded	dirty
later	raided	little	added	sorted
item	cider	bottle	sodded	murder
whiter	loader	sitter	madder	forty

Even if you do not create a lesson about them, at a minimum, be alert to flap words you have on spelling tests; pull them out for explicit instruction; and do not call in special education if you see flap words spelled with an “r”! The flap is a unique, distinctly American feature of English, and, as such, we should welcome this authentic “Americana” into our classrooms!

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Jim O'Toole, "Carter's Ferry Spoon River"