Assignment 3: Part 1

Language Systems – Grammar:
Teaching Past Counterfactual Conditionals to High-level learners

Word count: 2477

Pulkit Vasudha
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I. Introduction

A speaker’s range and accuracy of grammar is a barometer of his proficiency in the language. With the growing emphasis on communicative competence, grammatical structures frequent in spoken discourse are afforded high priority while less common ones such as the past perfect and counterfactual conditionals are, in my experience, considered with horror, glossed over briefly, or dismissed as 'unteachable' and 'unlearnable'. In a survey conducted by Covitt in 1976, conditionals ranked fifth (after articles, prepositions, phrasal verbs, and verbals) in terms of difficulty in teaching.

While conditionals are challenging at all levels, learners at an intermediate interlanguage “plateau” (Lewis 2001:10) find it particularly difficult to transfer these complex structures from their receptive to productive discourse. High-level Vietnamese learners often shy away from using them, particularly counterfactual conditionals, for lack of understanding and confidence. Intermediate Japanese and Taiwanese learners I taught avoided counterfactual conditionals at all costs, while an advanced Colombian learner dismissed them as “too complicated.” “Why use the past perfect when I can use the past simple?” she asked.

In this assignment, I have chosen to examine this area of grammar, and focus on expanding high-level learners' range of grammatical structures to express different meanings, with the use of past counterfactual conditionals. After analyzing the meaning, form and phonology of these conditionals, I will briefly outline the most common problems learners face, and propose suggestions for teaching this structure.
II. Analysis

What are conditionals?

Conditional sentences describe hypothetical situations and their consequences. According to most ESL course books and grammar books, there are four types of conditionals:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>'If' clause</th>
<th>'Conditional' clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 0:</strong></td>
<td>If I do yoga, I feel good.</td>
<td>If + present tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 1:</strong></td>
<td>If I do yoga, I'll feel better.</td>
<td>If + present tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 2:</strong></td>
<td>If I did yoga, I would feel better.</td>
<td>If + past tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 3:</strong></td>
<td>If I had done yoga, I'd have felt better.</td>
<td>If + past perfect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Parrott 2000:232)

Unlike the model above, which describes conditionals in terms of time frames, semantic categorization allows us to “account for a range of tenses, aspects and modality combinations” (Alberding 2004:35).

Barring Type 0 conditionals, which are used to express universal facts, rules, and certainties, it is 'more pedagogically useful' (MacAndrew 1991) to categorize conditionals on the basis of use rather than form. He makes the distinction between 'real' and 'unreal' conditionals:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Present / Future</th>
<th>Past</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Real Conditionals</strong></td>
<td>If you are hungry, what will you do?</td>
<td>If you were hungry (in the past), what did you (used to) do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unreal Conditionals</strong></td>
<td>If you were hungry (in the future), what would you do?</td>
<td>If you'd been hungry, what would you have done?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conditionals can “express a variety of meanings, are realized through a variety of forms, and used for a variety of discourse functions” (Norris 2003:39). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) divide conditionals into three semantic categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factual</th>
<th>Generic and habitual.</th>
<th>If I do yoga, I feel hungry.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future / predictive</strong></td>
<td>Strong condition and result.</td>
<td>If I do yoga, I'll feel better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imaginative</strong></td>
<td>a. Hypothetical present / future.</td>
<td>If I did yoga, I'd feel better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Past Counterfactual.</td>
<td>If I'd done yoga, I'd have felt better.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this essay, I will use Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's terms to distinguish between the various conditionals.
What are past counterfactual conditionals?

Under Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1999) classification, past counterfactual conditionals or third conditionals, express an imaginative semantic relationship, and are used to talk about past events, and how things that happened or didn't happen might have affected other things.

Past counterfactual conditionals are used to express impossible events or states in the “if” clause. They can refer only to past or present impossibilities (Norris 2003:41).

- *If Gandhi were alive, he’d be shocked.* (present impossibility)
- *If Gandhi had been alive in the 60s, he would have been friends with Martin Luther King.* (past impossibility)

Past counterfactual statements evoke a hypothetical world that counter reality, using the past perfect to refer to impossible events that did not happen in the past. The expression of an unrealized wish, or regret over past actions can be grammatically difficult for learners to grasp, especially if similar constructions do not occur in their L1. Even high-level learners resort to avoidance or reduction strategies, and simplistic grammar such as so, because, then to express meaning.

In a recent general English class, learners were observed saying,

“I went to see my grandmother yesterday, so I didn't hang out with you.”

Instead of,

*If I hadn't gone to see my grandmother, I would've hung out with you.*

It is important for upper-intermediate learners to be exposed to linguistically complex conditionals to push back their interlanguage boundaries and allow them to express a range of meanings using a range of grammatical structures.
## FUNCTIONS

Parrott (2000:235) distinguishes between three functions of past counterfactual conditionals:

| 1. Regret       | I wouldn't have signed up for this course if I'd known how much work it would be. |
| 2. Reproach     | If you'd studied harder, you would've passed the exam.                           |
| 3. Make excuses | If I hadn't been tied up at work, I would've definitely gone to the party.    |

Aitken (2002:114) makes a further distinction by categorizing seven different functions of past counterfactual conditionals:

| 1. Unfulfilled past conditions: | a. Tracing cause and effect in past chains of actions  
If I hadn't slept early, I would've seen the fireworks. |
| 2. Unknown past conditions:    | e. To deduce where persons / things are  
If he took it, he may have left it in his pocket. |
|                                | f. To deduce where persons / things were  
If he took it, it may have been in that coat I took to the cleaners. |
|                                | g. Saying 'serves you right'  
If he wanted it, he shouldn't have left it lying around. |
FORM

Past counterfactual conditionals consist of two clauses – a main (conditional) clause containing a verb in a form of would, which is dependent on a subordinate clause introduced by if (or another connective such as unless, even if, assuming, until etc.). In textbooks examples, conditional sentences usually begin with the subordinate clause if, however, the order of clauses can be reversed in most cases. When the conditional sentence begins with the if clause, we punctuate the clauses with a comma (Parrott 2000:232).

Contractions are used in conditionals in spoken as well as informal written discourse. While British English favors the contractions: I (subject) + had → I'd, it’s more common to contract would + have → would’ve in American English.

Base form:
If I'd known, I would have told you.
If + subject + past perfect, subject + would + have + past participle
Or,
I would have told you if I'd known.
Subject + would + have + past participle, if + subject + past perfect

Negative form:
If I hadn’t known, I would’ve stayed on.
If + subject + past perfect (negative), subject + would + have + past participle
Or,
I would've stayed on if I hadn't known.
Subject + would + have + past participle, if + subject + past perfect (negative)

Question form:
If she’d known he was here, would she have come?
If + subject + past perfect, would + subject + have + past particle
Or,
Would she have come if she’d known he was here?
Would + subject + have + past participle + if + subject + past perfect
There are two possible context-dependent meanings implied in the question form:

a. She didn't know, so she didn't come.

b. She came, but it's not certain whether she knew or not whether he'd be here.

Question tags:

She would've come if she'd known, wouldn't she?
(I believe she didn't come because she didn't know)
→ expects answer 'yes' to seek confirmation

Or,

She wouldn't have come if she'd known, would she?
(I believe she came because she didn't know)
→ expects answer 'no' to seek confirmation

While examples of conditional sentences in ESL textbooks and grammar books almost exclusively use the verb in its simple form, the progressive form is commonly used in both spoken and written discourse to emphasize the temporal nature of action:

I wouldn't have faced these problems if I had been staying at home.

We can also replace would with might or could in unreal conditionals to express possibility rather than certainty:

If she had known, she might not have come to the party.
The pronunciation of connected speech in the past counterfactual conditional is mainly concerned with the “flow of sounds which are modified through a system of simplifications” (Underhill 1994:58). The greater the speed of delivery in colloquial speech, the greater is the occurrence of assimilation (changing of sounds), elision (omission of sounds), vowel reduction, liaison, contractions, and juncture.

The main areas of phonological importance concerning past counterfactual conditionals are:

1. **Vowel Reduction**

In rapid speech, unaccented vowels are reduced in length, “moving towards a less distinct, more central vowel sound” (Underhill 1994:62). Weak forms within the past counterfactual conditionals include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong form</th>
<th>Weak form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>would</td>
<td>/wəd/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have</td>
<td>/hæv/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had</td>
<td>/hæd/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the learners’ perspective, one of the biggest problems is the recognition of conditional structures in rapid speech, especially when *if* occurs in the first clause but is unrecognizable in its weak form (Parrott, 2000:232). For e.g.,

If I were you… → /faɪweɪju:/

Example of weak forms within conditional question structures:

What would you have done? → /wʊt wʊdʒəˈæv dʌŋ/
2. Contractions

Seamless speech is characterized by words joined together and pronounced as one, often occupying a single syllable. This can occur when two single syllable words combine or an elision of sounds occurs. For e.g. I’d, would’ve, wouldn’t’ve, she’d’ve etc.

There's also a high instance of contractions in the written form (especially informal) of past counterfactual conditionals, with the elision indication by an apostrophe.

3. Intonation

Intonation refers to the “patterns of pitch change over an utterance or series of utterances” and relative pitch heights which together with stress and prominence provide emphasis to give meaning (Underhill, 1994:76). Through a subtle but complex system of varying pitch, stress and prominence, intonation lends meaning to an utterance.

The most frequently used referring tone, the falling-rising tone ↘↗, is found in past counterfactual sentences in the if clause, and the falling tone ↘ occurs in the main clause.

↘↗If I’d known, ↘ I would’ve TOLD you.

In the example above, the falling-rising tone in the first clause signifies shared information between the interlocutors, whereas the falling tone in the latter half denotes new, additional information.
II. Problems and Solutions

1. Meaning and Use

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), the syntactic and semantic complexities of conditional sentences make them among the most complicated structures in English language learning. As a result, even high-level learners face enormous challenges in understanding the hypothetical nature of the structure (as opposed to a past time reference), recognizing non-traditional forms, and using them correctly. In my experience, learners often have trouble with:

• not recognizing, and therefore not being able to understand and produce, conditionals when the *if* clause is left out in context. Without the *if* clause rooting the sentence in past hypotheticality, an intermediate Korean learner in an exam preparation class misunderstood, “I would have been killed (if the car hadn’t screeched to a halt),” as future intent rather than . In the case of the Korean learner and most high-level Vietnamese learners, the problem stems from a rule-based approach to grammar, without enough contextualization and exposure.

• differentiating past counterfactual from present counterfactual conditionals. Learners often get confused between counterfactual conditionals that express hypotheticality in the past, and in the present. An advanced-level Colombian lawyer I taught habitually made this mistake. When I asked her about her recent trip to Vegas, she said, “I stayed at The Hotel but if I’d won the lottery, I would stay at the Bellagio.” Vietnamese learners also often don’t recognize any difference between the present and the past counterfactual statements, using them interchangeably, or using the somewhat simpler construction of the present counterfactual to express hypotheticality in the past.

• use of conjunctions such as *as long as, if only, I wish, supposing,* etc. to construct past counterfactual conditionals. Without it having been brought to their attention, even advanced learners often fail to recognize, and therefore understand and produce, the past counterfactual conditionals form. The problem usually arises if learners are unsure of the meanings of the conjunctions themselves.

Most learners I taught in an multilingual upper-intermediate general English class in USA did not recognize the structure “I wish I had...” as a past counterfactual structure, and frequently used it to express future wishes.

Due to all the reasons cited above, even high-level learners may avoid using the past counterfactual conditionals. According to Bygate (1987:43), learners wanting to avoid using tricky structures resort to 'avoidance strategies' which involve either an abandoning or a
reduction of the intended meaning.

**Suggestions for teaching:**

In my experience, there is little exposure to conditionals in the early stages of second language learning, whereas at the intermediate level, course books begin to unleash conditionals and expect learners to memorize multiple forms and meanings.

To raise awareness of the semantic possibilities of past counterfactual conditionals, learners must have plenty of opportunities to “notice the linguistic wrapping in which the message is delivered” (Lewis 2001:159).

I find it useful to present conditionals as those expressing factual, predictive, and counterfactual rather than as Type 0-3, which is the usual classification in ESL coursebooks. An example of a well-contextualized counterfactual conditionals occurs in Outcomes Upper-intermediate (Appendix 1). I would draw learners’ attention to the examples in text and gap-fill activity where *if* and main clauses are used reversibly.

While there is a mention of the difference between present and past counterfactual conditionals in the grammar box, I don’t think it clarifies the distinction in meaning enough. Izumi (2000:266) remarks it is essential to make the distinction between past time reference of the main clause in past conditional, as opposed to present time reference in present counterfactual conditional, clear to learners so it doesn’t lead to future confusion.

It is also more rewarding for learners to work out ‘the relationship between meaning and form’ and begin to ‘make sense of a rule’ (Hedge 2000:146), rather than being given the rules, as would happen in traditional deductive teaching. To this end, I would ask learners to identify conditionals in the text, and categorize them as statements which express hypotheticality in the present or in the past.

To draw their attention to the *if* clause, I would ask learners if the meaning changed in each sentence without the *if* clause, and point out that in spoken discourse, a context is often already established, and the clause is elided to avoid redundancy.

Also, I would ask learners to substitute the if in the if clause with other conjunctions while retaining the meaning. If the learners had trouble doing so, it could be because they weren’t entirely sure about the meanings of conjunctions themselves. In such a case, a remedial lesson focusing on meanings and functions of different conjunctions may be useful. An activity I have successfully used at all levels involves asking learners to choose the correct conjunction from a choice of two depending on the context in which it appears. The text from Outcomes Upper-Intermediate (Appendix 2) can be adapted to include any conjunctions that learners may have particular problems with, to draw their attention to the difference in meanings.
2. Form

As if the semantic challenges of expressing hypotheticality in the past weren’t enough, learners also have to grapple with the syntactic process of stringing together two clauses, modals and auxiliaries to achieve meaning. According to Izumi (2000:267), “the double marking of the past, one marking indicating hypotheticality and the other indicating past reference, adds to the formal complexity of the past hypothetical counterfactual.” Even at higher-levels, learners cope with the complexity of the syntax by simplifying the grammar by:

- **dropping the auxiliary verbs**: Learners often do not see a rationale for the use of auxiliary verbs in conditionals, and leave them out under the pressure of communicating.  
  e.g. *If you* not *tell me, I* not *tell anyone.*  
  Instead of, *If you hadn’t* told *me the news, I wouldn’t have told anyone.*

  According to a colleague who has worked in Indonesia, this problem is common among Indonesian and Malay speakers, whose L1 has only two main modals – can and must. So learners would produce sentences like:  
  e.g. *If I* went *to the market, I* bought *the items.*  
  Instead of, *If I had gone* to *the market, I would’ve bought the items.*

- **regularizing the tense structure**: Since tenses are learned before conditionals, learners often revert to simplified tenses for temporal references – using future tenses to refer to the future, and past tenses to refer to the past in conditional sentences. In constructing past counterfactual conditionals, even high-level learners often use the past simple instead of perfective aspect.

  This is particularly common among Greek and Portuguese learners, use parallel forms in the two clauses of conditional sentences.  
  e.g. *If I went* to *London, I visited the British Museum.*

  *If you had started on time, you hadn’t missed train.*  
  (Swan, Smith 2001:120,135)

- Learners may also be misled by the reversible **order of clauses**. If they don’t recognize conditionals beginning with the *main* clause, they are unable to respond appropriately and produce similar sentences. This is common among learners who come from schools where there is a heavy focus on grammar rules and translation. My Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese students found it particularly difficult to isolate past counterfactual conditionals in texts when the main clause appeared before the *if* clause. “I never knew conditionals could start with anything other than *if,*” a Japanese learner in my multi-lingual general English class once remarked.
Suggestions for teaching:

Thornbury says that it is ‘virtually impossible’ to judge if a structure is correct in the absence of context (1997:223), therefore, a lot of the problems listed above can be solved in providing a sufficient context. However, explicit focus on the form can be a consciousness-raising exercise for learners to become more aware of their own specific problems, which they can then persevere to correct.

High-level learners in Vietnam often overuse the *if* clause to begin conditionals in casual speech, though these are “more prevalent in written discourse” (Cowan 2008:477). Combined with a disproportionate phonological stress on *if*, the structure sounds contrived. To successfully address this problem, draw learners’ attention to the reversible order of clauses, and simultaneously focus on the placement of auxiliaries, I often play conditional scrabble (Appendix 3) with my upper-intermediate Vietnamese learners.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) say acquisition of the tense-aspect system and the modal auxiliaries is a prerequisite for mastering conditionals, without which learners tend to overuse temporal grammatical structures in conditionals. To help Mexican intermediate learners in San Francisco become aware of the hypotheticality expressed using different tenses, I asked them to sort different conditional sentences into categories of past and present unreality. After they noticed the use of perfective aspect in past counterfactual conditionals, I asked them to contrast this with structures occurring in present counterfactual conditionals and how it affects meaning.

3. Pronunciation

Past counterfactual conditionals challenge learners’ receptive as well as productive abilities. It is not only difficult for learners to recognize syntactically long and complex past counterfactual conditionals in rapid speech but also produce them under real-time processing conditions with weak forms, contractions, and appropriate intonation.

- **Reception:** Learners are unable to recognize past counterfactual conditionals in rapid colloquial speech because native speakers always shrink the structures using vowel reduction and contractions. Even at higher-levels, learners are unable to recognize *if* and auxiliary verbs when pronounced indistinctly.

- **Production:** In constructing past counterfactual conditionals, learners are frequently so anxious to get the syntax right, they over-enunciate each word. They also tend to forget to contract auxiliary verbs and reduce vowels in unstressed words, which leads to unnatural speech.

Learners whose L1 is syllable-timed have particular problems with the stress-timed nature of
English, especially in the construction of long and complex conditional sentences. Learners often claim that native English speakers ‘eat their words’ (Swan and Smith, 2002:77), which makes it difficult for them to hear each word distinctly. An intermediate level Japanese learner in my general English class struggled in detecting past counterfactual sentences in CD recordings in the classroom, because he could never catch the “If”. Vietnamese learners also have difficulty with weak forms and sentence stress since their L1 is monosyllabic. Even at higher-levels, learners tend to stress every syllable, which produces a ‘staccato effect’ (Honey 1987:238).

**Suggestions for teaching:**

Learners can be made more aware of natural spoken forms with increased exposure to authentic speech. In my experience, teacher talk, which is one the richest sources of natural language input for learners, is often stripped of complex grammatical structures.

According to Kelly (2000:75), learners need to practice weak sounds to be able to produce them accurately, which can be done in a controlled, accuracy-focused drilling. With long sentences such as conditionals, it may be particularly useful to use drill using backchaining to preserve natural stress and meaning.

With my learners, I use both awareness-raising activities and drills to make students sound more natural. With Vietnamese, Chinese and Taiwanese students at higher levels, I have successfully used an activity in which learners fill in the weaker forms of auxiliary verbs into a table (Appendix 4) while listening to a story. Learners also find it challenging and useful to decode sentences written in phonemic script (Appendix 5). I usually give learners a few example sentences before asking them to challenge their partners with phonemic transcripts.

Cuisinaire rods are a good way to draw learners’ attention to contracted forms. One of my colleagues successfully uses cuisinaire rods with intermediate level learners to encourage the use of contractions in conditionals.
IV. Conclusion

In order to push back their interlanguage boundaries and make their discourse more semantically and linguistically complex, high-learners need to be exposed to and given opportunities to practice using past counterfactual conditionals.

Conditionals have consistently been rated as among the most difficult grammar to teach because traditionally, these complex grammar structures have been categorized according to the temporal reference only, rather than their semantic functions.

In the process of researching this assignment, I have gained valuable insight into the value of conditionals in learner discourse, the range of problems they pose to learners and ways to address them. I have also found invaluable resources that can be adapted and exploited in classrooms to introduce, practice, and review past counterfactual conditionals in a context.

By reflecting on problems inherent in the teaching and learning of past counterfactual conditionals, I have a better understanding of why conditionals were never a hit in my lessons before, and how I can overcome these problems in the future.

Looking forward, I intend to integrate many more consciousness-raising and scaffolding tasks that encourage learners to process language semantically, record it systematically, and use it regularly.
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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Text, Outcomes Upper-Intermediate Student’s Book
Appendix 2 – Conjunctions Review, Outcomes Upper-Intermediate Student’s book
Appendix 3 – Conditionals Scrabble
Appendix 4 – Weaker forms
Appendix 5 – Phonemic Transcripts
Appendix 1
Appendix 2
Appendix 3

Learners are given a grid like the one below with a few words written in random cells. Each player can use 12 words at a time to construct past counterfactual conditional sentences. Points are awarded for every correct sentence produced. Auxiliaries = 1, If = 2, verbs = 3 points.

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<table>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PULKIT VASUDHA
LSA PART 2: Teaching past counterfactual conditionals to High-level Learners
Appendix 4

Learners listen to a text, like the one in Appendix 1 and identify the weak / strong forms of verbs they hear.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>word</th>
<th>strong form</th>
<th>weak form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>am</td>
<td>/æm/</td>
<td>/m/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are</td>
<td>/ə:/</td>
<td>/ə/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is</td>
<td>/ɪz/</td>
<td>/əz/ /z/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was</td>
<td>/wəz/</td>
<td>/wez/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>were</td>
<td>/wəz:/</td>
<td>/we/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do</td>
<td>/du:/</td>
<td>/de/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does</td>
<td>/dəz/</td>
<td>/dez/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have</td>
<td>/hæv/</td>
<td>/əv/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has</td>
<td>/hæz/</td>
<td>/əz/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had</td>
<td>/hæd/</td>
<td>/əd/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can</td>
<td>/kæn/</td>
<td>/kən/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>could</td>
<td>/kəd/</td>
<td>/ked/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>would</td>
<td>/wʊd/</td>
<td>/wed/ /əd/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>should</td>
<td>/ʃʊd/</td>
<td>/ʃəd/ /ʃd/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Kelly 2001:74)
Appendix 5

Decode the following sentences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phonemic Script</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/faɪəldəldʒə jɛdɛnvheɪtɪpədɪədɪə/</td>
<td>If I'd told you, you'd have hated the idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/aɪwʊdəvkləmwdʒə fɛdə:smi:/</td>
<td>I would've come with you if you'd asked me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/fɑɪdnpɛn ɑɪdɛvmetɪm/</td>
<td>If I'd known, I'd have met him.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now, write 3 sentences in phonemic script and see if your partner can decode them: