

ENGLISH AS A FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE

PART 3: SPEAK TO BE UNDERSTOOD

Many nonnative speakers have problems with the American English sound system that make them hard to understand.

They can often be helped greatly by a few simple suggestions - some of which turn out to be useful for many native speakers, too. Let's take a closer look at those aids to clarity.

THE CASE OF THE MISSING VOWELS AND CONSONANTS

The majority of foreigners' pronunciation problems stem from the fact that their spoken language does not include all the sounds of American English. For instance, Russian and German have no w, th, or final voiced b, d, g, v, and z. French and Russian have no h. Japanese, Chinese, and other oriental languages lack the l vs. r distinction. And oriental and many other languages do not have the distinctions between three e-type vowels (*bait/bet/bat*) and three o-type vowels (*wrote/wrought/rot*).

As a nonnative speaker, how can you overcome such limitations? The answer is simple: practice each week, using a tape recorder for feedback. The best way to do this is with "minimum pairs" - groups of words that differ only in one sound. Say these slowly and carefully.

Here are some minimum pairs or groups that might be useful to you: **v/w**: vary ~ wary; **th**: tin ~ sin ~ thin; den ~ then ~ Zen; **e-type vowels**: fade ~ fed ~ fad; bait ~ bet ~ bat; **o-type vowels**: coat ~ caught ~ cot; **r/l**: right ~ light; core ~ coal; **h**: high ~ eye; to hold ~ too old; hue ~ you. (If you would like more detailed guidelines, feel free to contact us at the address given below.)

THE REDUCTION GAME

A key feature of spoken English is the *reduction of unstressed syllables*. Specifically, unstressed vowels should be reduced to the short neutral vowel schwa (pronounced like the "e" in *the*). Foreigners who violate this rule often end up with an "up-down" stress pattern that is exhausting to English listeners because it buries key information where the primary stress of a word is.

Here are some examples of properly "reduced" vs. "overpronounced" words. (The pronunciations are in brackets, with "*" denoting the reduced vowel schwa.) *Inconceivable*: [inc*nceiv*b*l], not [inconceivabel]; *topography*: [t*pogr*fi], not [topografi]; *crisis management*: [krais*s man*jm*nt], not [krais manajment]. Pay attention

to such vowel reduction as you listen to native speakers and practice it regularly, and you will find that people understand you more easily.

WATCH YOUR CONSONANTS . . . AND DON'T OVERDO REDUCTION OF UNSTRESSED SYLLABLES.

THE LIMIT: DROPPING CONSONANTS

One kind of reduction that is *not* helpful is dropping consonants. Unfortunately, both native and nonnative speakers very commonly

commit this sin, which accounts for many misunderstandings.

Why do native speakers do this? Mostly because they're lazy - but sometimes also because they find it cool. Supposedly, consonant-starved forms like *gimme* and *wannabe* mark you as "one of the boys." But beyond such common words (now listed in dictionaries), clarity quickly suffers.

The following examples illustrate the kinds of contractions you should purge from your speech in a hurry: [labtoy] for *laboratory* (*almost undistinguishable from [lavtoy] for lavatory!*); [fasnaing] for *fascinating*; [*kwim] for *equipment*; [prahli] for *probably*; [kyooksplainat] for *can you explain that?*

Some native speakers suffer from nervous "runaway speed" in a presentation. You can cure this simply by trying to say every consonant clearly; this will slow you down while keeping your focus where it should be: on helping the audience understand you.

Nonnative speakers, of course, have additional problems. Many of them omit consonants in certain positions because their own language does not allow them there. For instance, they may say [teksbook] or even [tekbook] for *textbook*. Alternatively, they may add a short vowel like schwa to break up a difficult consonant cluster, as in [tekst*book] or [tek*t*book].

Again, improvement will come from slow, deliberate practice. For instance, say the following words without omitting consonants or adding vowels to break up clusters: *structure, a crescent moon, world-wide, software, big game* (pronounce g+g as one *long g*, with no release after the first g), *quick fix, sob story, stopped pouring*.

The best practice for both nonnative and native speakers, however, costs no extra time: instead of just reading the newspaper, **read one article aloud each day**, taking care to pronounce all final consonants and clusters properly. Poetry works even better - and it may just brighten a gray or ordinary day!

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