

Speaking Better English

A Guide to Accent Reduction and Fluency in Spoken English

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Introduction

Without doubt, the most regular question I'm asked daily is

“How can I improve?”

Everyone seems to be looking for something to make their English perfect or at the very least better. Bookshops are full of packs which promise “English in 20 days” offering everything from hypnosis to subliminal messaging. English Academies take huge sums of money for simple book style grammar information. English is a commodity these days and it seems some people want to buy and sell it to make a huge profit. We live in a cardboard world where things are bought and “disposed of” quickly. Language learning may be one of the few things left which demands interaction with others for it to be successful. It asks the Learner to reach into the unknown and take the hand of another, who is happy to correct mistakes. It also demands patience, fortitude and a certain childlike innocence and trust.

This book is offering advice to those people who are searching for a new experience or who are open to new techniques in the Learning Process. It is aimed at those students who have reached a level of spoken English where they find it hard to express ideas fluently and are still not connecting in a positive way with the English world around them.

The Fear of Speaking

In this section I want to talk about the importance of speaking in English and to give you some methods and ideas which you can work with. The biggest problem however with speaking, is not using the language itself but the “fear” of what might happen.

“What if they don't understand me”?

“What if they laugh at me”?

“They won't have patience with me”

Before we talk about methods of using the language, we must talk about the handling of this fear which aims to limit us and our practice of English.

Firstly, if there was a way that I could allow you to have perfect English by waving a magic wand in some kind of Harry Potter style ceremony, I would not do it. The reason is because I would not want to deny you of the beautiful journey which you have to make to learn. This journey involves people, places and mindsets which you would not normally encounter. There is no easy way to learn to speak, you need to speak again and again and again until you feel comfortable using the language. Whether you like it or not, this involves other people and you can't get away from that. Later we will talk about how you can use techniques to help yourself speak better when you are alone (the shadow method) but right now we want to talk about the subject of fear and ways in which you can overcome it. The first way is by practising with someone you trust. The call to speak a new language is a call to meet new people, to pass the boundaries which hold you back and indeed continue to hold you if you don't get rid of them.

Why is Speaking So Important?

Speaking is so important for two reasons:

1. You want to be clearly understood and know that you are using the language properly.
2. As a child this is the way you learnt. You had no books, you could not read or write and you simply listened to your parents and repeated. It was completely natural and free.

Learning English without speaking is a little bit like learning to swim by spending your time in the library reading about it, how to move your arms and legs but never entering the swimming pool.

Of course you can read about English and it is important you do, but this can never replace the practice of moving your mouth.

Even if you really feel you can't talk to anyone. For example if you have some medical condition which stops you attending a face to face practice group or if you have no Internet Access, you can still practice speaking with Teachers or at least you can use the Shadow Method which we will talk about later on.

When we learn to speak from books we are learning backwards. As Children we could not read or write and relied on listening and repeating. That is what gave us our accent. Doing that now is what will give you an English accent. I would stress though that its not simply listening and repeating, there's no growth in saying or repeating something badly. The growth comes with imitating, pretending to imitate that person by trying to make the same sound no matter how ridiculous it sounds. Essentially its changing your mouth movements.

Finding Someone to Practice With

When I ask people if they practice with someone I usually get one of three answers:

“There's no one lives near me”

“I tried to find someone but failed”

“Everyone seems younger than me and we have nothing in common”

Particularly with the last one, I need to remind the person that the intention is not to marry them, but simply to practice English with them.

I agree finding the right person does bring up a minor difficulty, but this, like anything in a new project is a barrier which needs to be dealt with, a door that needs to be walked through. The reason why it needs to be walked through is because it is an opinion or barrier which automatically shuts other people out. Yet the key of learning lies in practising with others. I have met people who have said:

“Yes I really wanted to learn English but couldn't find anyone here to practice with so I stopped”.

So clearly this idea or objection to reaching out is a very deep one. People will even quit before they will engage in practice. I think that's very sad. Especially when we are living in an age of technology like no other. Any resistance to reaching out needs to be dealt with harshly. You need to

create a safe environment where you can talk, regularly.

How to Find and Practice With Another Person

I teach on an Internet platform called Italki. You can find links to it on my blog www.teacherjoseph.com The reason why I like it so much is because it offers a number of free services as well as actual English Lessons.

1. It asks you what language you are learning and this profile is available to other people on the network. People will approach you to see if you want to practice unless you disable the functionality.
2. There is a notebook and discussion forum where you can ask, advertise or select people to practice with you. You can offer your native language in exchange for time to practice English. It takes some time to find the right (reliable) person but it can be done. Meet on Skype twice a week or once a day, its a wonderful start and up to you both to agree times. Italki has literally millions of users from all over the world. But remember quality time is better than wasting time.
3. You are completely in control at all times and can reveal what you want. Of course some care needs to be taken at least initially. When I was learning Spanish I met some wonderful people who became very close friends but I also met some people who were not really interested.

There are also face to face groups which you can find in your local area. You can ask in any language school or any Teacher. Any website which has a list of local events or clubs usually has details. I can assure you that all cities have some kind of meetup group. Remember English people love alcohol so its likely this will be in a pub or cafeteria. Here in Spain there are also “walk and talk” groups where people walk on the beach or mountains and exchange Spanish and English at the same time.

“Learning English is a little bit like being in a relationship, some days are good, some days are bad and some days you just want to run away. But its the commitment which brings you back, the commitment you made to carry on”

Language Learning Methods

As an English Teacher I know that that there is no teaching method which is superior to the others. People have different reasons for learning too. One of the joys of life is that people learn in different ways. Having said all of that we all learnt to speak the same way, we listened and repeated, long before we knew what a book was.

Next, we are going to look at how to use the Shadow Method to get your accent reduced. But first I would like you to study the below table to learn more about you and the way you prefer to learn. This is not really important in learning how to speak better but it will allow yourself to know more about what kind of person you are. So you can approach a teacher with more confidence by knowing WHAT YOU WANT rather than relying on a Teacher to misread the signs about the type of person you are.

Remember also that you can employ Teachers to engage you in conversation, we are trained to allow you to speak and give opinions which helps you to construct thoughts and ideas. Don't be afraid to ask for a reduced price for this service. Especially where Teachers are simply "talking and correcting".

LEARNING/TEACHING ENGLISH METHODS

Memorising Grammar	Written texts in books etc.	Translate from a Language into English
The Natural Method	Everyday spoken language	Student learns by learning words and phrases directly in English
Audio Lingual Method	Sound patterns	Listening and speaking exercises
Cognitive Code Approach	Grammar rules	English grammar rules used
<i>The Person Centred Approach, some examples</i>		
– The Silent Way	Student interaction rather	Teacher is silent to allow the student to grow

	than teacher talking	
Hypnosis /subliminal	Meaningful words and vocabulary	encourages subliminal learning of English both intentionally and unintentionally
– Group Learning	Student interaction	Understanding of English through student participation
Native Language Approach	Listening comprehension and body action	English speaking delayed, visuals used and the students native language.
Communicative Learning	Interaction, communication and role play	Understanding English through active role plays, games etc.
Practical Conversation	Focus on imparting information	Content based on relevance to students' lives and hobbies etc.
Strategy Learning	Learning “how to learn”	Teach learning strategies, useful in the business world.

Please study the above table well to see what type of Learning suits you best. Some cultures respond well to authoritative based Learning where information is thrown to them directly and then they are forced to learn. This is no longer a popular teaching method in the western world

LANGUAGE SHADOWING

Language Shadowing or “the Shadow Method” is a very simple, basic technique which involves listening and repeating.

Why I am interested in Dr. Alexander Arguelles technique is not because he invented something fantastic but I was doing it anyway and encouraging others to do the same long before he came up with the idea. It is natural to us, its how we learnt as Children however he requests such other actions as reading scripts and walking. Shadowing is also a technique used by public speakers.

The next part of this book will be devoted to the “Shadow Method” and how best to use it. Remember the Shadow Method is not a magical patented system, so you can adjust it or make it more suitable to yourself. I personally do not agree with walking whilst reciting, I don't think its necessary to have a script if you are using it for accent reduction either.

The Shadow Method

The Shadow Method is very simple it involves:-

1. Listening
2. Repeating
3. Reading

4. Walking

Now, I have to say my method of using this is a little bit different from the usual way. This is because I usually employ it to help with accent reduction. Simply repeating a word using bad pronunciation does not help reduce an accent in fact it worsens it and re-enforces a bad way of speaking.

For me, the Shadow Method is not about repeating, but more about IMITATING. A good level of vocabulary is not required in fact its better to try and shut down your mind because the purpose of the exercise is to simply listen and repeat the sounds not to translate the words.

Like a child you are trying to capture the sounds in English by simply hearing and repeating, that is a very different thing from trying to capture and repeat words. I suppose it depends on what you are using it for.

So the technique is as follows:

1. You listen to a podcast ensuring that its in the type of accent you are hoping to achieve
2. You simply IMITATE out loud what you think you hear, no matter how ridiculous you think it sounds. Around 20 minutes every day should be enough. Understanding the text is not important but keeping pace with the speaker is important.
3. You need to decide whether you want to follow the advice of linguists and walk at the same time.

About point 2. You have a choice, you can either:

- a. repeat everything as you hear it at the same speed
- b. focus in one one sound at a time, repeat it every time you hear it and carry it with you daily.

Now I have to say at this point, although these instructions seem easy, I am still shocked at people who try to use this method to cram vocabulary. I cannot stress enough that this method is not an academic way of learning, its not about vocabulary or Grammar etc. This method is a simple mechanism to get you to pronounce SOUNDS properly. No prior knowledge of the language is required when performing this and if you try to make sense of what you are hearing you will find it unnecessarily complicated. This is the reason why I do not recommend a transcript and why I keep comparing it to the way Children learn.

If you are interested in using this language in a more in depth way you can find Professor Arguelles on the Internet. He has made many videos about his type of shadowing method, In it he discusses the ins and outs of shadowing, and how to use it alongside an English course. While “listening to

audio and repeating it simultaneously while walking swiftly” is a summary of what he’s saying, but not something you might necessarily agree with.

I’ve tried doing this with Spanish and Dutch, long before I knew any vocabulary and it helped immensely. It just seemed to come naturally, I had never heard it being called something. When I tried shadowing, I discovered that it was far more difficult than I first thought it would be. I’d practically trip over my own tongue trying to keep up with the native speakers, struggling to say things that I thought I could say quite well. But I soon realised it was because I was trying to translate it at the same time. To “let go” was the answer and simply hear and repeat.

Well, we are at the end of my short booklet now on the subject of better spoken English. I hope you have enjoyed it.

Further points which I hope to pick up in future books are:

- Linking and Blending
- Pitch and Tone