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English - I (Basic English)
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Lecture 23
How to Improve Your Language Skills?

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Welcome, all. In today's class, I am going to give you a few tips to improve your language skills.

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So let us get started with the question, why are the varieties of English of the native speakers hard to understand? Well, the first and foremost reason is the accent. You know English is a global language which means English is spoken all around the world. So, what are the different varieties of English that we know? We know there is Canadian English, there is American English, there is British English.

And again, within British English, there is something called Wales English, Scottish English there are many different varieties. There is Australian English; there is Indian English, there is Chinese English, there is African English. So the list is big. So, an important point that needs to be understood or noted is that the number of a non-native speakers of English is higher than the number of native speakers of English. This means when non-native speakers use the language, there is always an interference or influence of their mother tongue. So, let me substantiate that point with an example. Let us take the sentence; Take a piece of cake. How do Indians pronounce that? Take a piece of cake, which means there is no aspiration there. What is aspiration? Aspiration is that extra puff of air when you pronounce the word.

Britishers, on the other hand, pronounce the sentence with aspiration. So how do they pronounce? They pronounce it something like; Take a piece of cake. On the other hand, Africans pronounce the sentence, my appropriation may not be perfect, pardon me for that, but I will try. They might say something like; Take a piece of cake. So you see how accent makes a difference. The second reason why the varieties of English of native speakers is hard to understand is because of the speed.

The speed at which they pronounce words or sentences. So, native speakers of English speak the language really fast. So this results in something called reductions. And what are reductions? You would have heard words like shoulda, woulda, coulda; so what is shoulda? Shoulda is a reduction of should have; coulda is a reduction of could have, woulda is a reduction of would have, gonna is a reduction of going to.

Similarly, when they talk fast, another phenomenon occurs, and that is called contraction. Examples of contractions are I'll instead of I will, you'll instead of you will, we're instead of we are. So, let me use that in a sentence. Instead of saying, 'I am going to be really upset if you are going to be doing this', a native speaker might talk really fast with reductions and contractions

and say the same sentence or pronounce the same sentence like; 'I'm gonna be really upset if you are gonna do this.' How do they say? 'I'm gonna be really upset if you are gonna do this.' So, what are the reductions and contractions used in the sentence? The contraction is 'I'm' which is 'I am.' The reduction used is 'gonna' which means going to.

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The next is vocabulary and grammar. Well, if you do not have a good vocabulary or a basic understanding of the grammatical structure of that language, then you might find it hard to comprehend. Let me substantiate this point with an example. So, this example is actually an exercise. So, let us do this exercise together.

So, I am going to take a passage, and I am going to read it out for you. I want you to answer a question after I read this out. So, let me start; this passage is adapted from the colours of animals by Sir John Lubbock in 'A Book of Natural History.' Let me read this out for you; 'the colour of animals by no means is a matter of chance, it depends on many considerations, but in the majority of cases it tends to protect the animal from the danger by rendering it less conspicuous. Perhaps it may be said that if colouring is mainly protective, there ought to be but few brightly coloured animals. There are, however, not a few cases in which vivid colours are themselves protective. The Kingfisher itself, though so brightly coloured, is by no means easy to see. The blue harmonizes with the water, and the bird as it darts along the stream looks almost like a flash of light, a flash of sunlight.'

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Why is the English of native speakers hard to understand?

- The example of the kingfisher in the passage is intended to prove _____.
- A) that the color of an animal is not always adapted to match the background color of its environment
- B) that the color of an animal is always adapted to match the background color of its environment
- C) that the color of an animal is an **extraneous** detail, evolutionarily speaking
- D) that the color of an animal is, statistically speaking, most likely to be adapted to match the background color of its environment
- E) None of these answers; it is an **anecdotal story** designed to inject some **levity** into the passage

3. VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR

- Adapted from "The Colors of Animals" by Sir John Lubbock in A Book of Natural History (1902, ed. David Starr Jordan)

*The color of animals is by no means a matter of chance; it depends on many considerations, but in the majority of cases tends to protect the animal from danger by **rendering** it less **conspicuous**. Perhaps it may be said that if coloring is mainly protective, there ought to be **but few brightly colored animals**. There are, however, not a few cases in which vivid colors are themselves protective. **The kingfisher itself, though so brightly colored, is by no means easy to see. The blue harmonizes** with the water, and the bird as it **darts** along the stream looks almost like a flash of sunlight.*

So, after reading this passage, I want you to answer this question and what is the question? The example of Kingfisher in the passage is intended to prove? So, you need to select the right option. The options are A; that the colour of an animal is not always adapted to match the background colour of its environment.

Option B; that the colour of an animal is always adapted to match the background colour of its environment. Option C; that the colour of an animal is an extraneous detail evolutionary speaking. Option D; the colour of an animal is statistically speaking most likely to be adapted to

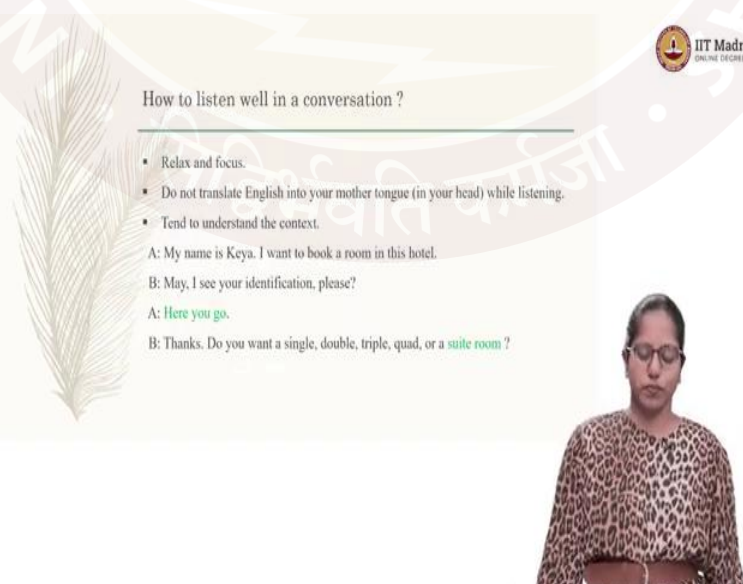
match the background colour of its environment. And Option E; none of these answers, it is an anecdotal story designed to inject some levity into the passage.

Now, let us suppose someone does not understand the meaning of the words that are marked in green, i.e., extraneous, anecdotal story and levity. Do you think the person will be able to solve this passage or solve this question after reading the passage? No. Now, let us suppose the person understands the meaning of these words. Now, even if he understands the meaning of these words and does not understand the meaning of the words and expressions that are marked in red and green, then he would not be able to answer this question.

The first sentence is, 'the colour of animals is by no means a matter of chance.' What does it say? Does it say the colour of animals is a matter of chance or does it say the colour of animals is not a matter of chance? To understand this, you need to know the meaning of the expressions 'by no means' and 'a matter of chance.' Similarly, the next sentence is, 'the Kingfisher itself though so brightly coloured is by no means easy to see.'

What does this mean? Does it mean that the Kingfisher is easy to see or Kingfisher is not easy to see? Well, the answer is, the Kingfisher though brightly coloured, is not easy to see. So let me repeat that for you. For you to understand this passage and to mark the right answer, you need to know the meanings of certain expressions and vocabulary words that are given in this passage.

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How to listen well in a conversation ?

- Relax and focus.
- Do not translate English into your mother tongue (in your head) while listening.
- Tend to understand the context.

A: My name is Keya. I want to book a room in this hotel.
B: May, I see your identification, please?
A: **Here you go.**
B: Thanks. Do you want a single, double, triple, quad, or a **suite room** ?

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Well, let us come to the next subsection of this module. How to listen well in a conversation? Well, the first and foremost point is that you need to relax and focus. Second-language speakers of English tend to translate English to their mother tongue when a conversation happens with another person, and that is not the right thing to do. Because you are going to waste a lot of energy and effort in translating and therefore, your focus and attention go from what is spoken to the translation that is happening inside your head.

And the next important point is to try to understand the context. Now, even if you do not understand the meaning of your words, if you try to understand the context, if you get the context of what is being spoken, you will be able to derive the meaning of certain words that you did not understand. Now, let me substantiate that point with an example.

So, let us suppose someone is hearing recorded audio of a conversation between Keya and a receptionist at a hotel. So, Keya goes and meets with the receptionist and says; 'Hi, my name is Keya. I want to book a room in this hotel.' The receptionist says; 'may I see your identification, please?' And Keya says, 'here you go.' Receptionist responds thanks, do you want a single, double, triple, quad or a suite room?

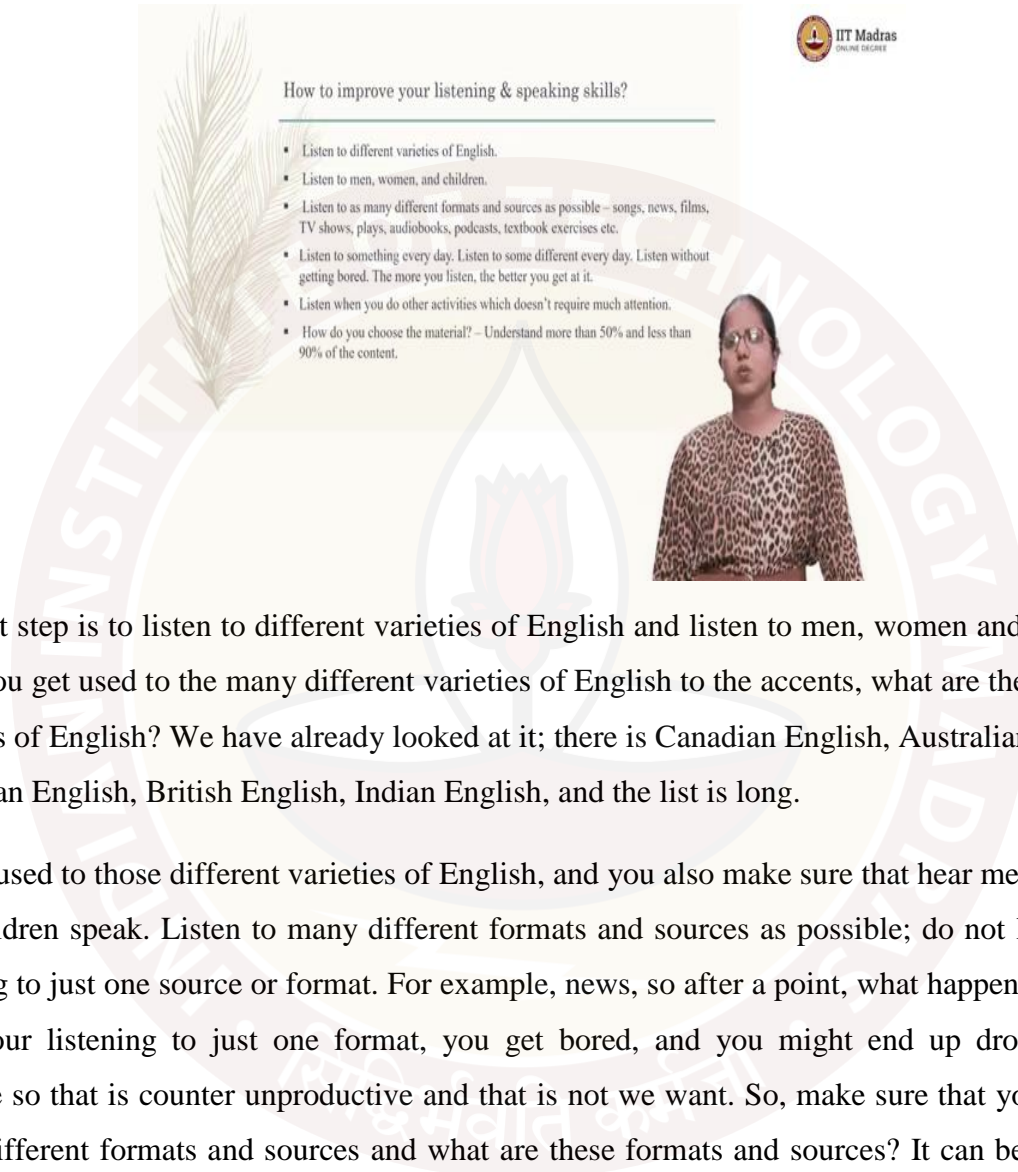
Now, let us suppose the person who has been hearing this recorded audio speech does not understand the meaning of the expression, 'here you go.' Now, let us see if he can derive the meaning from the context. Similarly, if he understands the context, he will be able to derive the meaning of 'here you go' and 'suite room.' How? Let us look at the sentences that precede the expression 'here you go.' What is that? 'May I see your identification, please?'

And, what is the sentence that comes after this expression? 'Thanks', which means he can safely assume that Keya has shown her identification card, and maybe 'here you go' means something like 'here it is.' What is a quad room? If he understands the meaning of a quad room or a triple room or double room and single room, then it is very easy for him to assume that a suite room must be a room that is bigger than a quad room.

Quad room is a room that accommodates four people and triple room; 3 people, double room; 2 people and single room; 1 person. So suite room should be a room larger than a quad room. And his guess is right. A suite room is a room attached to another room. So, it is something like a

mini apartment; it can have multiple rooms. Suite room is the largest room that you can get in a hotel. So, I hope this example you understand, what deriving meaning from the context means.

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The slide is titled "How to improve your listening & speaking skills?". It features a list of six bullet points on the left and a video inset of a woman on the right. The background of the slide is light yellow with a faint watermark of the IIT Madras logo. The IIT Madras logo is also visible in the top right corner of the slide.

- Listen to different varieties of English.
- Listen to men, women, and children.
- Listen to as many different formats and sources as possible – songs, news, films, TV shows, plays, audiobooks, podcasts, textbook exercises etc.
- Listen to something every day. Listen to some different every day. Listen without getting bored. The more you listen, the better you get at it.
- Listen when you do other activities which doesn't require much attention.
- How do you choose the material? – Understand more than 50% and less than 90% of the content.

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The first step is to listen to different varieties of English and listen to men, women and children. So, if you get used to the many different varieties of English to the accents, what are the different varieties of English? We have already looked at it; there is Canadian English, Australian English, American English, British English, Indian English, and the list is long.

So, get used to those different varieties of English, and you also make sure that hear men, women and children speak. Listen to many different formats and sources as possible; do not limit your listening to just one source or format. For example, news, so after a point, what happens is if you limit your listening to just one format, you get bored, and you might end up dropping the exercise so that is counter unproductive and that is not we want. So, make sure that you rely on many different formats and sources and what are these formats and sources? It can be songs; it can be news, films, TV shows, plays, audiobooks, podcast and textbook exercises. The next point is to listen to something every day and listen to something different every day.

For example, if you are watching the news for half an hour today, make sure that you listen to songs the next day, or you work on a few grammar exercises, or you watch a couple of films in a week. So, make sure that you listen to something different every day. So, what is the purpose,


what is the intention behind that? The intent is, you should listen without getting bored. So, the more you listen, the better you get at it.

The next step is to listen when you are doing other activities. Particularly the activities that do not require much attention and what are those activities? Jogging, gymming, exercising, maybe when you chop vegetables, maybe when you cook. Make sure that you listen to a song when you chop vegetables and try to memorize the lyrics and sing it out your friends or if you are a shy person, sing it yourself in the bathroom.

So, make sure that you listen to something different, particularly when you are doing activities that do not require much attention. Now the important question is, how do you choose the material? Make sure that whatever material you chose, you understand more than 50 per cent and less than 90 per cent of the content. If you choose a material where you understand less than 50 per cent of the content, then it means that the material is very hard for you.

So after a point, you might not understand, and you might lose interest in what you are reading. Likewise, if you chose a material where you understand more than 90 per cent of the content, it simply means that the material you picked up for yourself is very easy. So, there is not going to be much learning because you are going to learn new words or expressions. So, choose your material wisely.

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A few good sources

- News – BBC, CNN, Fox News, Indian News Channels in English etc.
- Radio – BBC Radio Service, available online - free of cost.
- Podcast – Radio shows that are available only on the internet.
- Movies – 2 Hollywood movies per week (Do not watch with subtitles)
- TV shows – Better than movies because they are longer.
- Songs – Opportunity for repetition.

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Now, let me give you a few good sources. For news, you may watch BBC, CNN, Fox News, Indian News channels are also there in English, you may watch them if you are interested in current affairs or you would like to know what is happening around you. You can watch the BBC radio service which is available online and free of cost.

And what is a podcast? Podcast are radio shows that are available only on the internet. Then there are movies; you may watch two English movies every week, but make sure that you watch them without subtitles. TV shows are better than movies because they are longer. So, you will have more input.

The next option that you have is to listen to songs. Songs are good because lyrics get repeated. So, there is an opportunity for repetition, and you will be able to memorize those sentences and sing to your friends and sing to yourself, so in the process, you might be able to improve your pronunciation.

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A few good sources

- Audiobooks – YouTube, Audible, Blinkist, etc. (2X natural speed).
- TED talks – speeches and informational videos, professionally produced, highly suitable for listening.
- Use dictionaries – pronunciation.
- Grammar books and worksheets (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) - available online free of cost.
- Talk to your friends in English.

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The next is audiobooks. You will get a lot of free audiobooks on YouTube. If you want high-quality audiobooks, then you may also purchase Audible or Blinkist. In Audible, there are thousands of audiobooks and Blinkist summarizes a book in 15 minutes you get it in audio format, and you can also read this summary of that in this app. If you like the summary of the book and if you want to read the entire book, then you may go ahead and purchase that either in audible or you could go to the internet and see if you can get it free of cost, it might be available.

The next option is TED Talks. What is Ted? TED is a company that produces speeches and informational videos that are professionally produced, very suitable for listening. So, if you listen to TED Talks, your knowledge of a particular domain or a topic might also improve. So, it is basically like two birds in a single stone. So, you improve your language, and you also improve your understanding of a particular topic, your knowledge about a particular domain.

The next important source is dictionaries. Well, if you have any doubts with regard to the pronunciation of words, then I would say dictionaries are a good source to rely on. You may also use the internet; you can type and search for their pronunciation. The good thing about the internet is also that you can get the translation in different accents.

For example, if you wanted in American English, if you want to know the pronunciation of a word in an American accent, then you can type it out, and you will be able to hear that, listen to that. The next source, the next option is grammar books and worksheets. So, grammar books are of different levels. There is beginner level, there is an intermediate level, and there is an advance level. We should; you should pick a grammar book according to your level. You can work on a few worksheets or grammar exercises. So, this can actually improve your hold or grip on grammar.

The final point is to talk to your friends in English. Well, if you have been talking to your friends in your mother tongue, it might be a little awkward to talk to them in English one fine day. So, a good solution to that could be to find people who are interested in improving their language skills among your friend circle.

And, try to convince them to speak to you or communicate with you in this language. So, initially, you may use the bilingual method where you mix your mother tongue and English, and eventually, you can switch to English. So with that, we come to the end of this class, I hope you enjoyed this class. I will meet you with a different topic, on a different day. Until then, stay safe, take care. Bye.