# Learning a language? Speak it like you’re playing a video game | Marianna Pascal | TEDxPenangRoad

For the past 20 years, I've been helping Malaysian and other Southeast Asians to speak better English.

And through training thousands of Southeast Asians, I've discovered a very surprising truth. I've discovered that how well somebody communicates in English actually has very little to do with their English level.

It has a lot to do with their attitude towards English.

There are people out there who have a very low level of English, and they can communicate very, very well. One of them that I remember was a student, a participant of mine named Faizal.

He was a factory supervisor - English level very, very low - but this guy could just sit and listen to anybody, very calmly, clearly, and then he could respond, absolutely express his thoughts beautifully, at a very low level of English.

So, today I want to share with you what is so different about people like Faizal?

How do they do it?

And second of all, why is this so important not only to you, but to your children, to your community, and to the future of Malaysia?

And third of all, what's one thing you can do, starting today, if you want to speak with that calm, clear confidence that people like Faizal have.

First of all, what is so different? How do people like Faizal do it?

To answer that question, I'm going to take you back about 10 years, okay?

I was training staff at that time, and my daughter, at that time, was taking piano lessons.

And I started to notice two really strong similarities between my daughter's attitude or thinking towards playing the piano and a lot of Malaysians' thinking or attitude towards English.

First of all, I should tell you my daughter absolutely hated piano, hated the lessons, hated practicing.

This is my daughter practicing piano, okay?

This is as good as it got.

This is the real thing.

And she dreaded going to piano lessons because to my daughter, going to piano lessons, she was filled with this sort of dread.

Because it was all about not screwing up, right?

Because like a lot of piano students, to both my daughter and her teacher, her success in piano was measured by how few mistakes she made.

At the same time, I noticed that a lot of Malaysians went into English conversations with the same sort of feeling of dread.

This sort of feeling that they were going to be judged by how many mistakes they were going to make, and whether or not they were going to screw up.

Now, the second similarity that I noticed was to do with self- image.

My daughter, she knew what good piano sounded like, right?

Because we've all heard good piano.

And she knew what her level was, and she knew how long she'd have to play for to play like that.

And a lot of Malaysians, I noticed, had this idea of what good proper English is supposed to sound like, and what their - I see a lot of you nod - and what their English sounded like, and how far they would have to go to get there.

And they also felt like they were - like my daughter - just bad, bad piano player, bad English speaker, right?

My English not so good, lah. Cannot. Sorry, yah. Cannot. Ah - So I could see these similarities,

but I still couldn't figure out, okay, what is it about these people like Faizal, that are so different,

that can just do it smoothly, calmly, with confidence?

One day, I discovered that answer, and I discovered it quite by chance.

It was a day when my computer broke down, and I had to go to a cybercafe.

Okay, it was my first time, and I discovered cybercafes are disgusting places, okay?

They're really gross.

They're smelly, and they're filled with boys.

And they're all playing noisy, violent games.

They're just disgusting places.

But I had to go there.

So I sat down, and I started noticing this guy beside me.

And I became very interested in this guy next to me.

Now, this guy is playing this game that is basically, it's like shooting people until they die.

And that's it. (Laughter)

That's the game, right?

And I'm noticing that this guy is not very good.

In fact, he's terrible, right?

Because I'm looking, and I'm seeing, like, a lot of shooting mand ... not much dying, right?

(Laughter)

What really interested me was behind this lousy player were three of his friends, sort of standing there watching him play.

What I really noticed was even though this guy was terrible, even though his friends were watching him, there was no embarrassment.

There was no feeling of being judged.

There was no shyness.

In fact, quite the opposite.

This guy's totally focused on the bad guys, smile on his face.

All he can think about is killing these guys, right?

And I'm watching him.

And I suddenly realize: this is it.

This is the same attitude that people like Faizal have when they speak English, just like this guy.

When Faizal goes into an English conversation, he doesn't feel judged.

He is entirely focused on the person that he's speaking to and the result he wants to get.

He's got no self-awareness, no thoughts about his own mistakes.

I want to share with you a real, true example, to paint a picture, of somebody who speaks English like they are playing piano and someone who speaks English like they are playing a computer game.

And this is a true story.

It happened to me.

A while ago, I was in a pharmacy.

I had to buy omega; my doctor said I should get omega.

And I go to the shelf, there's tons of omega, there's omega that's high in DHA, omega that's high in EPA, and I don't know which one to buy.

Now, the sales rep happened to be there.

And I saw she's like this well-dressed, professional woman.

I walk over to her, and I see this look as she sees me, this sort of - it's a look I recognize very well.

Her eyes go all wide.

It's sort of that panic:

Oh my God! I've got to speak to a native speaker; she's going to judge me and notice my mistakes.

I go up to her, and I explain my situation: which omega do I get?

And she starts explaining to me everything about DHA and EPA you could possibly imagine.

She speaks very quickly, goes all around in circles.

And when she finishes, no idea what to buy.

(Laughter)

So I turn to the girl behind the counter. Now, the girl behind the counter, I heard her before, her English level is very low.

But when I walk over to her, this girl, there's no fear.

In fact, she's just looking at me.

You know that look?

Like...Yeah? Okay...So, how?

(Laughter)

Yeah, I've been in Malaysia a long time.

(Laughter)

So, I go up to her and I explain the problem, EPA and DHA.

She looks at me, she says,

"Okay, yeah. "

"Ah, EPA for heart."

"DHA for brain."

(Laughter)

"Your heart okay or not?"

(Laughter)

So I said,

"Yeah, yeah,"

I said, "my heart is really, I think it's pretty good."

She says,

"Your brain okay or not?"

(Laughter)

I said, "No. No, my brain is not as good as it used to be."

She looks and says,

"Okay lah, you take Omega DHA!"

(Laughter)

Problem solved, right?

So we've got two different kinds of communicators.

We've got the one who's got a high level, but totally focused on herself and getting it right,

and therefore, very ineffective.

We've got another one, low-level, totally focused on the person she's talking to and getting a result.

Effective.

And therein lies the difference.

Now, why is this distinction so important not just to you, to your children, but to the future of Malaysia and countries like Malaysia?

And to answer that, let's take a look at who actually is speaking English in the world today, okay?

So, if we looked at all of the English conversations in the whole world, taking place right now on planet Earth, we would see that for every native speaker, like me, there are five non-native speakers.

And if we'd listen to every conversation in English on planet Earth right now, we would notice that 96% of those conversations involved non-native English speakers - only 4% of those conversations are native speaker to native speaker.

This is not my language anymore, this language belongs to you.

It's not an art to be mastered; it's just a tool to use to get a result.

And I want to give you a real-life example of what English is today in the world, real English today. This is another true story.

I was at a barbecue a little while ago - this was a barbecue for engineers, engineers from all over the world.

And they were making hot dogs.

Some of the hot dogs were regular hot dogs, and some were these cheese hot dogs, you know, with the cheese in the middle.

A French engineer is cooking the hot dogs, and he turns to this Korean engineer, and he says, "Would you like a hot dog?"

And the Korean guy says, "Yes, please!"

He says, "Do you want the cheese?"

And the Korean guy looks around at the table, he says, "I no see cheese."

The French guy says, "The hot dog is contains the cheese."

The Korean guy doesn't understand him, right?

So the French engineer tries again.

"The hot dog is ... making from ... with the cheese."

Korean guy still doesn't understand.

He tries again,

he says, "The hotdog is coming from - No, the cheese is coming from the hot dog."

(Laughter)

Korean guy cannot understand.

Now there's a Japanese engineer who's been listening to this conversation, turns to the Korean engineer and he says, "Ah! Cheese ... integrator!"

(Laughter)

He understands, okay.

(Laughter)

Everybody understands.

So, this is what English is today.

It's just a tool to play around with to get a result, like a computer game.

Now, the challenge is that we know in schools all around the world, English is not really being taught like it's a tool to play with.

It's still being taught like it's an art to master.

And students are judged more on correctness than on clarity.

Some of you might remember the old comprehension exam in school.

Does everybody remember in school when you'd get a question about a text that you read, you'd have to read through some text, right?

And then answer a question to show that you understood the text?

And this may have happened to you that you showed you understood the text, but you got a big X because you made a little grammar mistake.

Like this student.

This student clearly understood paragraph four.

But no, not correct!

Because he left the letter N off the word "environment."

But in the real world, what would matter?

In the real world, what would matter is did you understand the email, or did you understand your customer so that you can go ahead and take action?

Now, the problem that I see here, over and over, is that people take the attitude they developed about English in school, and they bring it into their adult life and into their work.

And if you're in a stressful situation, and you're having a conversation, and you're trying to give a result to someone and say it correctly, your brain multi-tasks, it cannot do two things at once.

And what I see is the brain just shutting down.

And you may recognize these three symptoms of the brain shutting down.

The first one is that your listening goes.

Someone is talking to you, and you're so busy thinking about how you're going to respond and express yourself correctly, you don't actually hear what the other person said.

And I can see a lot of nodding in the audience.

The second thing to go is your speaking.

Your mind sort of shuts down, and that vocabulary you do know just disappears, and the words don't come out.

The third thing to go is your confidence.

The worst thing about this is you may only be [un]confident because you cannot express yourself clearly,but to the person talking to you, they may misunderstand this as a lack of confidence in your ability to do the job, to perform.

So if you want to speak English like Faizal with that great confidence, here's the one thing that you can do.

When you speak, don't focus on yourself.

Focus on the other person and the result you want to achieve.

Imagine a next generation of Malaysians, all with that wonderful confidence in communication that Faizal has, at any level of English.

Because let's remember that English today is not an art to be mastered, it's just a tool to use to get a result.

And that tool belongs to you.

Thank you.

(Applause)