

Transcript - "Listening Time" Episode 131

Welcome to the Listening Time podcast. Hey everybody, this is Conner, and you're listening to Episode 131 of the Listening Time podcast. Today, we're going to talk about a topic that I love. It's one of my favorite topics, and I think that this episode is going to be very interesting for you. We're going to talk about English pronunciation.

So, this is a very relevant topic for all of you, because if you're listening to me, this means that you're learning English. So, pronunciation is probably the element of English that is talked about the least. It's probably the element that is the least focused on when you learn English with a teacher, or in school. Pronunciation is a hard topic, especially English pronunciation.

But I love it. It's one of my favorite aspects of teaching English, as you can probably tell by now... especially if you've joined my membership, because you've seen that I do a lot of training and practice with the sounds of English. So, I really liked this topic. And I want to talk about English pronunciation in general, and about the difficulties with pronunciation, and about how you can improve your pronunciation. So, this should be a great topic for today.

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And of course, if you like this podcast, please give it a five-star rating and write a review, and share it with anyone else you know who's learning English. That really helps me out and it will help them out too. Alright, let's get started.

Okay, let's talk about pronunciation, specifically, English pronunciation, and even more specifically, American English pronunciation. So, English is one of the hardest languages to pronounce like a native speaker. All languages have their challenges when it comes to pronunciation.

However, if you want to speak like an American, for example, and you didn't learn English as a child, that is really, really, really hard. I can't even emphasize enough how hard that is. In my whole life, I don't think I've ever heard a person who learned English as an adult and speaks exactly the same way that an American speaks, for example. I don't think I've ever seen that in my whole life.

I've seen a couple of people who have gotten close... who've gotten very close, actually, but I don't think I've ever seen or met a person who sounds exactly like a native speaker if they learned as an adult. Of course, if you learned as a kid, or even as

a teenager, yeah, you can achieve that level. Many people achieve that level. Especially if you learned as a kid, well, you can just become a native speaker, of course.

However, I'm talking to you guys who... most of you are adults, and you're learning English as a foreign language. And so, you have this unique challenge of learning English as an adult, and trying to improve the way that you speak and your pronunciation. So, that's the first thing that I wanted to mention, is that it's really hard to sound like a native speaker, if you're learning as an adult. So, the first thing you need to do is lower your expectations. Okay?

So why is English pronunciation so hard? Well, the main reason is because in English, stress is everything. Stress is king. Okay? English is what we call a stress-timed language. Basically, what that means is that we have more or less the same amount of time between stressed syllables.

So, even if you have a word or a phrase where there is a stress syllable, and then three unstressed syllables, and then another stress syllable, that time between the stressed syllables would be pretty much the same as if you had another word or another phrase, where it's one stress syllable, one unstressed syllable, and one stress syllable.

Let me give you an example. So, if I say the phrase, "sadly, no," in that phrase, I have three syllables. Sadly, no. So, the way I would say that is I would stress the first syllable. I would have emphasis on "sad," not on "ly." I don't say "", I say sadly. Right? So, I stressed that first syllable. And I stress, "no." Sadly, no. So, stress, and then not as much stress, and then stress. And so, you can hear that pretty clearly. Right?

However, if I say the phrase, "unfortunately, no," now, I have stress on "for"... unfortunately. But then, all of the next three syllables after it are all syllables that don't have a lot of stress. And then the word "no" is stressed. So, listen again: unfortunately, no. So, that amount of time between the "for" and the "no" is pretty much the same as the amount of time in the phrase, "sadly, no." That "ly" in the word sad has pretty much the same amount of time that we use to say it as the last three syllables of unfortunately.

So, because of that rule, there are many times when syllables are said really fast and really short. So, listen to the to one more time. Sadly, no. Unfortunately, no. So, you can hear how fast and how short those syllables are on the word, unfortunately. Right? So, that's an example of what a stress-timed language is.

So, the opposite of a stress-timed language would be a syllable-timed language. So, if you speak Spanish, for example, you speak a syllable timed language. So, each syllable has a pretty similar amount of time that it takes to pronounce that syllable. You don't have these big differences in the length of syllables. In English, an unstressed syllable might be 1/3, or sometimes 1/4, the length of a stressed syllable. That's a huge difference.

However, in a syllable-timed language like Spanish, you don't have that difference, right? Stressed syllables and unstressed syllables don't have a big difference in how long it takes to say them. So, that's why if you're a Spanish speaker, for example, and you are trying to speak English like a native, it can be very hard to replicate this stress timing, because you're not accustomed to reducing and shortening all of these unstressed syllables. That's not something that you do in Spanish.

So, that's the difference between a stress-timed and a syllable-timed language. And so, in a stress timed language, when a syllable is not stressed, it can often become reduced. So, for example, the word "for" is usually not stressed in English. So, we don't pronounce that as "fɔr". We say "fɔ", right? I say, for example. I don't say, "fɔr". You hear that? There's a difference. So, that's an example of how an unstressed syllable or word becomes reduced.

And that happens all the time in English. That happens in virtually every sentence that we say. These words or syllables that aren't stressed can often become reduced. Their pronunciation changes because the vowel is shortened. Okay? So, that's stress, in summary, in a nutshell, okay? That can make English a very, very difficult language to pronounce like a native speaker.

And besides stress, there's also the issue of sounds, individual sounds, that can be hard because they're different in English than they are in your language. We have different sounds in English than the sounds in Spanish, for example. So, besides stress, you also have to deal with these new sounds that are unfamiliar to you. It's not natural for you to make these sounds.

So, there are other things that are difficult, but really, the two main things that make English so hard to pronounce is the stress, number one, and number two, some of the sounds might be hard. So, those are the biggest challenges that you will face.

So how do you improve your pronunciation? I just talked about pronunciation and about the difficulties with English pronunciation, but now, the question is, how do you actually improve in this area of your English learning? Well, it's important to note that pronunciation doesn't improve the same way as fluency, or listening or vocabulary. Those things improve in a more natural way. And if you've been listening to me for a long time, you probably know by now that I'm an advocate of allowing yourself to acquire the language in a natural way.

By the way, when we say that you're an "advocate" of something, we're saying that you support some idea or something. So, I'm an advocate of allowing yourself to acquire the language naturally mainly through listening, but also reading. So, when you listen and you read, you acquire listening skills and reading skills, of course. You acquire vocabulary, and you even acquire fluency, because you have full phrases and collocations in your brain that you can reproduce once you've heard them enough. Okay? So, those things improve naturally.

However, pronunciation doesn't improve as naturally as these other elements. Okay? So, pronunciation requires a more concentrated effort in order to improve it. Listening will improve your pronunciation. That's for sure. If you listen a lot, and if you listen very intently, that will help you improve your pronunciation. No doubt.

However, beyond that, if you want to actually have a big improvement in your pronunciation and improve it faster, then the key to this is that you need to notice your mistakes. You need to notice the real sounds of English. You need to notice how native speakers say something versus how you are expecting them to say it.

And once you begin to notice these things, you start to shift your understanding and your expectation of what things are supposed to sound like. Okay? By the way, the word "shift" just means that you change, okay? So, when you start to notice these things, then your whole perception of sounds, and this whole element of English, will

change. You'll start to be able to identify the difference between how you say something, and how a native speaker says something. Okay? So, noticing is key.

And how do you notice? Well, this is also something that doesn't come naturally, most of the time. It does to an extent, but it's something that comes more with practice and training, actually. So, for example, my English Pronunciation Seminars and my Listening Practice Seminars are a great way to start to notice things, because I focus the whole seminar on showing you different patterns that you need to notice, and I help you change your perception of what things are supposed to sound like. So, for example, my seminars could be a great way for you to start to notice these things. And you get those if you join my membership, of course.

And just being with a teacher, and working with a teacher who is trained to help you with your pronunciation is another way to start to notice these things. A teacher can point these things out to you, and help you notice them. By the way, when we say that you "point something out," we're saying that you indicate or identify it, so that the other person notices it. So, a teacher can help you do that. My seminars can help you do that.

And then, once you've been trained a little bit, then you can start to do this on your own, and you can start to notice more things by yourself. You won't notice everything, but you'll start to notice more. So, it's good to get this type of training to start noticing on your own.

And when it comes to noticing and focusing on mistakes, I want to point out that there are two categories of pronunciation mistakes. So, there are mistakes that are easily noticeable and fixable, and then, there are mistakes that aren't. So, let me explain this. So,, a lot of mistakes can be categorized as mistakes that you can easily notice and fix if someone points them out to you. You probably won't notice them on your own, but a teacher or my seminar, for example, might point it out, and then you can fix it.

So, for example, things that are related to stress are actually pretty fixable. For example, within one word, you might be stressing the wrong syllable. For example, the country Japan... in this word, the second syllable is stressed, Japan. However, many English learners stress the wrong syllable. They say, "japan". And that's wrong. But it's very easy to notice, if a teacher points that out to you. And it's very easy to fix. You just stress the other syllable. Instead of "japan", you say, Japan, right? It's not hard. So, that's an example.

And stress within a sentence. For example, instead of saying, "i want it", what we would say is, "I want it"... in most cases. So, instead of stressing the "i," we would stress the "want." I want it. Not, "i want it". Right? If someone points that out to you, that you're stressing the wrong word, it's pretty easy to notice that and then to say it correctly. That doesn't mean that you'll say it correctly next time. But in this moment, you can say it correctly, and start to register that in your brain. You can register that error there, and maybe notice it a little bit more in the future.

Also, with skipped syllables. For example, in the word "family," the "i" is silent. We don't say "famili". We say family. That's something that a teacher can point out to you, and it's pretty easy to fix. Just don't say the middle syllable. It's just family. Like, it's not "famili". It's "several." You just skip the syllable. So, if someone points that out to you, it's pretty easy to fix.

Also, certain letter combinations... like the “tu” can be pronounced “chu” sometimes, like “situation.” And “du” can be with a “j” sound, like “graduate,” okay? Or sometimes, you're just saying the wrong vowel. Instead of saying “priority,” maybe you say, “”. And you just need to change the “pree” to “pri.” Or maybe you say, “”, but the correct pronunciation is “notice.” You just need to change the “” to an “o”... notice, right?

So, those are examples of fixable errors that are very easy to identify... if you're a trained teacher who can actually teach pronunciation, of course. So, in my seminars, for example, I point these things out, or other teachers who teach pronunciation can easily identify this, and you can fix it, right?

However, there are other pronunciation mistakes that are much harder to identify and fix. And these have to do with your accent. So, your accent refers to the way that you pronounce English sounds based on the sounds in your own language. So, for example, there are certain vowel sounds in English that you don't have in Spanish, for example.

So, like in the different vowels in the words, “hit” and “heat,” that might be hard for you to even hear the difference, right? Or “laugh” vs. “love,” or “food” vs. “foot.” Those different vowel sounds in those words might be really hard for you to identify and pronounce differently, because some of these are sounds that you don't have in your language. So, because of that, it's harder to hear them and harder to fix them.

So, there are many other examples that I could give, but I think you get the point, right? There are some errors that are not easy for you to hear, and they're not easy for you to fix. And you have to except the fact that you're not going to get rid of your accent very quickly. That's going to stay for a long time. And usually, it stays forever, but you can reduce it over time. But it takes a long time. Okay?

So, when it comes to improving your pronunciation, I would say that you should focus mostly on the fixable errors, okay, the ones that are very easy to notice and fix. And if you fix those errors, your pronunciation will improve a lot, because there are a lot of fixable errors. However, when it comes to your accent, you need to have more realistic expectations. You can also take classes with an accent coach, a professional who can help you with this, but this is a very specialized field, of course.

So, that's pretty much what I wanted to talk about today. I hope this gave you a good idea of why pronunciation is difficult in English, and how you can improve it. And of course, remember to sign up for my membership if you want my pronunciation training. Specifically, if you become a Super Member, or anything higher than that, then you get my pronunciation seminars. And even just with the Listening Practice Seminars, this will also help you with your pronunciation. So, if you want my training, make sure to sign up. The link is in the Description below this episode. That's www.patreon.com/listeningtime

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