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Basic English Pronunciation

English pronunciation can be troublesome for English language learners because there are three versions of accepted Standard English: British English, General American, and General Australian. On top of these three types, there are different accents that accompany speakers, which may make it difficult for non-native people to understand the spoken language. Here we will help you understand the sounds of English better so that you may understand why you'll find some words difficult to catch or pronounce.

Sounds

Let's first take a look at how many sounds there are in English. There are generally about twenty-four to twenty-five consonant sounds and eighteen to twenty-three vowel sounds. The numbers range because different researchers have concluded there are different numbers for all three standard types. English has rules governing pronunciation and spelling; however, since it has many words taken from different languages, these rules are very complex. Therefore, it seems as though people do not always pronounce the words the way they spell them.

Stress and Syllables

In English, stress is phonemic, which means that every word has one strong stressed sound that the listener depends on to understand the word. By changing the stress, it could change the meaning of the

word or not mean anything at all to the listener. The rest of the syllables may be shorter or weaker sounding, and depending on the speaker, the sound might be slightly different. That's why we can communicate even using different versions of English: although the weaker syllables may sound different, the stress is generally in the same position. This also means that English is a stress-timed language. The stress appears in more or less a steady beat when speaking, and the weaker syllables are all adjusted to accommodate the stressed sound.

Examples of some English words

I. "dessert" vs. "desert"

A "dessert" is the sweet food you eat after a meal, and a "desert" is the area of land covered in sand. The stresses in the two words are in different parts, which make it possible to distinguish the meanings.

II. "present" vs. "present"

"Present" with a stress on the first syllable is the noun meaning "gift." The second "present" with the stress on the second syllable is a verb that means to formally give something to another.

By understanding the rhythm of English, you will be better equipped with the knowledge of what you need to look out for. Try imitating a native speaker's pronunciation as much as possible when you practice speaking. By doing so, you will be practicing detailed sounds, which will help you hear them the next time someone utters them. Keeping the right beat of each sentence will also help your overall fluency.