



ACCENT REDUCTION



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I. An Introduction to Accent Reduction

Would you like to...

- be better understood over the phone?
- be more confident when meeting people?
- speak English more like a native speaker?
- eliminate having to repeat "Please say that again" over and over?
- make more effective business presentations?

Many of the English pronunciation problems that ESL learners have are caused by mistakenly using sounds in their first language. Therefore, the pronunciation problems that you may have are probably quite similar to the problems that other ESL students have from your native language. Native English speakers confirm this when they say that you have, for example, a Russian or Chinese accent. Many accent reduction programs are based on research that identified the specific sounds that each language group (e.g. French, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, etc.) has when speaking English. For example, 70% of native Spanish speakers have trouble properly pronouncing the /st/ sound in **stick**, while native Mandarin Chinese speakers have no trouble at all with the /st/ sound. In another example, research shows that the final /l/ sound in **feel** is omitted by about 70% of Mandarin speakers but only about 20% of Spanish speakers. Your native language provides a lot of information about typical problems that you MAY have in English. The following tips will help you reduce the influence of your first language on your English:

- **Observe the mouth movements of native speakers and try to imitate them.** When you are watching TV, look at the mouth movements of the speakers. Repeat what they are saying, imitating the intonation and rhythm of their speech. In addition, be sure to use the cutting edge software program [ESL PRO](#), currently used by numerous public and private schools around the world to teach English pronunciation. It accelerates the learning process by teaching the key sounds that make up the English language in 31 lessons. The student is then taught how to combine these sounds into words and sentences. This portable language lab has been shown to greatly reduce the time it takes to learn and improve pronunciation.
- **Until you learn the correct intonation and rhythm of English, slow down your speech.** If you speak too quickly with the wrong intonation and rhythm, native speakers will have a hard time understanding you. Don't worry about your

listener getting impatient with your slow speech – it is more important that everything you say be understood.

- **Listen to the “music” of English.** Don't use the music of your native language when you are speaking English. Each language has its own way of “singing”.
 - **Use your dictionary.** Become familiar with the phonetic symbols used in your dictionary and look up the correct pronunciation of words that are hard for you to say.
 - **Make a list of frequently used words that are difficult for you to pronounce and then ask a native speaker to pronounce them for you.** Record these words, listen to them, and practice saying them.
 - **Buy books on tape.** Listen and read at the same time. Record yourself reading some sections of the book. Compare the sound of your English with that of the speaker from the book on tape.
 - **Pronounce the ending of each word correctly.** Pay special attention to plural and 3rd person singular verb “-s” and past tense verb “-ed” endings.
 - **Read aloud in English for fifteen to twenty minutes each day.** This will help you strengthen the mouth muscles that you use when you speak English. Research has shown that it takes about three months of daily practice to develop strong mouth muscles for speaking a new language.
 - **Record your own voice and listen for pronunciation mistakes.** Many people hate to hear the sound of their voice and avoid having to listen to themselves speaking. However, this is a very important exercise because doing it will help you become conscious of the mistakes that you are making.
 - **Be patient.** You can change the way you speak but it won't happen overnight. People often expect instant results and give up too soon. You can change the way you sound if you are willing to put some effort into it.
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II. How to Improve Your Pronunciation

Word stress is the key to understanding spoken English. English is considered a stress-timed language, which means certain syllables receive more stress than others while the other non-stressed words are quickly glided over. Native speakers of English use word stress naturally. It's so natural for them that they don't even know they use it. Word stress is not used in all languages. Some languages, Japanese or French for example, pronounce each syllable with e-equal em-pha-sis. So, non-native speakers who don't use correct word stress often encounter two problems:

1. They find it difficult to understand native speakers, especially those speaking fast.
2. The native speakers may, in turn, find it difficult to understand the non-native speakers.

So, what exactly is 'word stress'? Native speakers of English do not say each syllable with the same force or strength. In one word, they accentuate **ONE** syllable. They say one syllable **loudly and clearly** and all the other syllables more **quietly**.

Let's take 3 words: **photograph**, **photographer**, and **photographic**. Do they sound the same when spoken? No. Here's why:

PHO to graph

pho TO graph er

pho to GRA phic

ONE syllable in each word is stressed more than the others. And it is not always the same syllable. This happens in ALL words with 2 or more syllables: TEAcher, JaPAN, CANada, aBOVE, converSAtion, INteresting, imPORtant, deMAND, etCETera, etCETera, etCETera.

The syllables that are not stressed are 'weak' or 'small' or 'quiet'. Native speakers of English listen for the STRESSED syllables, not the weak syllables. If you use accurate word stress in your speech, you will instantly improve both your pronunciation and your comprehension.

Try to hear the stress in individual words each time you listen to English - on the radio, or in films for example. Your first step is to HEAR and recognize it. After that, you can USE it!

When you learn a new word, you should also learn its stress pattern. If you keep a vocabulary book, make a note to show which syllable is stressed. If you do not know, you can look in a learner's dictionary. All good learner dictionaries give the

phonetic spelling of a word. This is where they show which syllable is stressed, usually with an apostrophe (') just before or just after the stressed syllable.

In addition to word stress, you also have to use correct **sentence stress** to sound like a native speaker.

As a general rule,

- stressed words in a sentence are considered **content words**. These include **nouns** (e.g. *kitchen, Peter*), (most) **main verbs** (e.g. *visit, construct*), **adjectives** (e.g. *beautiful, interesting*), and **adverbs** (e.g. *often, carefully*).
- non-stressed words are considered **function words**. These include determiners (e.g.: *the, a, an*), auxiliary verbs (e.g.: *is, am, were*), prepositions (e.g.: *before, of, in*), conjunctions (e.g.: *but, and, so*), and pronouns (e.g.: *they, she, he*)

Read the following sentence aloud:

*The **beautiful mountain appeared transfixed** in the **distance**.*

Now read this sentence aloud:

*He can **come on Saturdays** as long as he doesn't have to **do any homework** in the **evening**.*

Notice that the first sentence actually takes about the same time to speak well! Even though the second sentence is approximately 30% longer than the first, the sentences take the same time to speak. This is because there are five stressed words in each sentence.

Try this simple activity to practice using correct sentence stress:

Write down a few sentences, or take a few example sentences from a book or exercise. First, mark the word stress (check a good learner's dictionary if you're unsure), and then underline the stressed words in each sentence. After that, read aloud focusing on stressing the underlined words and gliding over the non-stressed words. If you do this regularly you'll be surprised at how quickly your pronunciation will improve! By focusing on stressed words, non-stressed words and syllables take on their more muted nature.

When listening to native speakers, pay particular attention to how those speakers stress certain words and try to copy this when you speak.

» **Tips:**

1. Remember that non-stressed words and syllables are often "swallowed" in English.
 2. Always focus on pronouncing stressed words well. Non-stressed words can be glided over.
 3. Don't focus on pronouncing each word in a sentence with equal stress. Focus on the stressed words only.
-

III. British English vs. American English

Are American English (AE) and British English (BE) separate languages or two varieties of English? Some say they are two different languages and others see them as different forms of one language. Of course, there's no correct answer to this question; it is whatever people want to believe. We can only say that there are some differences between them. Before we do that, you should understand that these differences are somewhat minor and with the ongoing internationalization of our modern world, these differences are diminishing steadily.

The few differences that do exist between British and American English tend to enrich communication rather than slow it down. Although not all of our British readers may agree, it does seem that the American version of spoken English is becoming more and more dominant for several reasons. For example, when you go to the UK and switch on the TV you will see a lot of American programs and films that, of course, are shown in the original American version. Thus, people watching TV will learn a lot of American vocabulary and phrases that they easily internalize and may use as their own. As a result, modern British English is much more likely to be influenced by American English than the other way around because when you live in the US and watch TV you will rarely see a British show or film.

Another area where American English currently dominates is international business. Most globally operating companies are based in the US and hence the influence of American English terminology is very strong. However, the more you look into this topic, the more variations you will encounter and it would be impossible to cover them all in one article. That's why we'll move on now to the differences between British and American English. Instead of giving you a comprehensive rundown of all imaginable items, we'll give you just a few clear examples.

» Spelling

British English has a tendency to keep the spelling of many words of French origin, whereas Americans try to spell more closely to the way they pronounce words; further, they remove letters that are not needed. Here are some examples:

BE

colour
centre
honour
analyse
fulfill
cheque
tyre

AE

color
center
honor
analyze
fulfil
check (noun)
tire

Remembering which spelling is correct can be tough, particularly when a reliable source spells a word one way while another equally reliable source spells the word another way. The reason this usually happens is simply this: one source is using “the Queen’s English,” while the other is using American English.

To be correct in your own usage, you should first consider the nationality of your target audience. Second, you should be consistent in following either British or American English. Otherwise, your writing is sure to be criticized (or should I say “criticised?”). For example, the words *favour* and *labor* should not be used in the same document. Although both American and British versions of English are considered correct, American spelling is usually simpler. Therefore, it is generally best to use American English spelling, unless a document is specifically created for British readers.

» Pronunciation

There are dozens if not hundreds of different ways to speak English. We are unable to cover all the varieties of accents, dialects, and derivations of spoken English in this article. Instead, let’s focus on the two main types.

As you know, there are two main standards of spoken English - British and American English. Interestingly enough, Received Pronunciation (RP), which is also known as the “Queen’s English” or “Oxford English”, is spoken only by about 5% of the UK population. This means that there are many different dialects to be found in the British Isles. If you travel in the UK you will notice that the differences in pronunciation are stronger and wider than in the US although the latter is clearly the larger country. Perhaps this is due to the fact that statistically the average American relocates more often than does his British counterpart. A dialect develops when people live closely together for a longer period of time and the community creates their own unique way of speaking. People in the southern US states have a distinctive “drawl” whereas people from Boston sound quite

different. But let's just focus on the major differences between RP and standard American English:

- The /r/ sound may not be audible in some British English words; for example, "car". This dropped /r/ is also common in New York and Boston dialects.
- In American English the distinction between the words "can" and "can't" is sometimes hard to notice, while in standard British English you can clearly hear a difference.
- Americans tend to pronounce words like "reduce", "produce", "induce", "seduce" - mostly verbs that end with "-duce" - like this: /doos/. In British English this is often slightly different: /dyoos/.
- Americans have a tendency to reduce words by omitting letters. The words «facts» for example sound in American English the same as «fax» - the «t» is not spoken.
- Sometimes vowel sounds are omitted in British English, such as in the word "secretary", where the sound /a/ is not spoken.
- Word stress is sometimes different in each version:

advertisement: /ad-ver-'taiz-ment/ (AE)

/ad-'ver-tIz-ment/ (BE)

➤ Vocabulary

There are some words and terms that are used mostly in either British or American English:

BE

lift
boot
trousers
lorry

AE

elevator
trunk
pants
truck

Slang words and colloquialisms are also different in each country.

IV. How Children Can Learn to Read and Speak Better Through Phonics

Of all the skills that children learn, one of the most important- if not the most important- is reading. Parents are children's first teachers. Reading, talking, and singing to children help develop skills that lead to becoming better readers. Children who know nursery rhymes learn to listen for sounds and identify patterns. Children who are read to on a regular basis are developing their "ear" for phonemic sounds. Talking to children about signs, cereal boxes, and other everyday written material will help children understand the importance of letters and words. At a young age, most children can spot the letters in their own name when they see them. This begins their use of verbal skills, listening skills, and reading skills that will be the foundation for their learning all through school. This is the point at which they enter the classroom and the teacher's job begins. Understanding and being able to use the sound/symbol relationship is an important part of that instruction. If children are to learn to recognize written words accurately and quickly, they need to know how to apply their knowledge of **phonics**.

The idea of "**phonics**" is that students are taught the various sounds that English letters have. The advantage of this over simply teaching the alphabet is that once they have mastered the main sounds, they can then read many English words!

A dictionary definition of the word "**phonics**" provides the following description(s):

- The science of sound; acoustics.
- A method of teaching beginning readers to read, spell, and pronounce words by learning the sound of letters, letter groups, and syllables,

Therefore, phonics is all about writing, reading, recognizing, and producing the phonetic values of a language at a beginning level for learners of a second or foreign language. Due to this definition and the general perception many teachers have of phonics, this is necessarily an area of study most important to low-level learners and children.

As a general guide, phonics-orientated study focuses on teaching young and low-level learners how to read, write, identify, and produce the various sounds of English - both as isolated units and as groups of sounds to make syllables and words. Phonemic awareness, combined with systematic phonics instruction, is a powerful way to help children figure out unknown words.

Once learners have established solid phonics skills, they are ready to move into areas of pronunciation that have more to do with words as they sound in combination to create sentences; for example, rhythm and intonation. Rhythm involves syllable-stress (within a word) and word-stress (within sentences) - crucial elements for students to learn in order to be able to produce natural-sounding English. Intonation can have (amongst other things) a major influence on meaning for English sentences.

In most phonics programs the following topics are taught:

- Alphabet sounds
- Short and long vowels
- Combination sounds
- Silent letters
- Prefixes and suffixes
- Beginning and ending sounds
- Word definitions

V. Speech Articulation Disorders... How Pronunciation Software Can Play a Role in Overcoming Them

Speech articulation disorders are disorders in the production of individual speech sounds. Consonants are most often misarticulated. Normal articulation The ages listed below are the ages at which 90% of children (native speakers of English) can say sounds appropriately:

- At 32 months a child should have acquired /p/, /h/, /b/, /m/, /n/
- At 36 months a child should have acquired /f/, /w/, /l/, /g/, /d/, and the "ng" sound
- At 48 months the child should have acquired /s/
- Articulation disorders are only considered a disorder when the sound being said incorrectly should have already been acquired

There are four types of errors in articulation. These are best remembered as the acronym S.O.D.A. SODA stands for Substitution, Omission, Distortion, and Addition.

1. Substitution occurs when a sound is substituted for one the speaker cannot make yet. E.g.: wed(x)-red, or fumb(x)-thumb.

2. Omission occurs when a sound is left out that is too hard. i.e. ed-red.
3. Distortion occurs when the sound is not left out or substituted but does not sound right. There is an attempt to make the sound but it is misarticulated.
4. Addition occurs when an extra sound is added. E.g.: *galue(x)-glue*.

Articulation disorders may result from abnormal structures of the articulators, faulty learning (no physical/anatomical reason), hearing loss, or neurological damage (problems with the nervous system).

➤ Main Causes in Children

1. Faulty learning is the #1 reason in children.
2. Hearing loss causes trouble with consonants and vowels in severe cases.
3. Structural differences such as cleft palate or poor dentation (misalignment of teeth or poor shape of the dental arc).
4. Neurological - Cerebral palsy results in tight muscles that may cause a delay in articulation and poor coordination.

➤ Main Causes in Adults

1. Poor learning. This is usually corrected before adulthood but not always.
2. Hearing loss makes it harder for adults to monitor their own speech.
3. Changes in anatomy and oral structures such as a glossectomy (removal of pieces of the tongue), car accidents that cause facial fractures, or tumors in the mouth that may or may not have been removed.
4. Neurological – A stroke may cause paralysis of the tongue and face or cranial nerves. Multiple sclerosis or an aneurysm can also cause damage.

➤ Therapy:

An effective therapeutic program to improve speech articulation disorders should consist of the following steps:

- Sensory perceptual training (hearing one's own mistakes)
- Producing a new sound with cuing
- Able to make sounds correctly in isolation
- Use the sound in syllables
- Use the sound in words
- Use the sound at the phrase level
- Use the sound at the sentence level
- Carry over the sound and make it automatic

Most ESL learners would like to be able to speak English like a native speaker, but English pronunciation is often a significant problem for them. Poor English pronunciation may confuse people even if you use perfect grammar. You can use

simple words and simple grammatical structures that make people understand you, but you cannot use "simple pronunciation".

There are three levels of English pronunciation:

Level 1: People often don't understand what you want to say. You use the wrong sounds in English words.

Level 2: People understand what you want to say, but it is unpleasant to listen to you.

Level 3: People understand you, and your English is pleasant to listen to.

Level 3 can be called "good" pronunciation. Keep in mind that good pronunciation does not mean a perfect American or British accent. You don't have to sound like the Queen of England, the Prime Minister of Canada, or the President of the United States. But your accent must be close to the standard. What is the standard? Well, that depends on where and with whom you will speak English! Turn on your TV and watch channels like CNN International, CBC, NBC, BBC, or Sky News. You will hear many different people (news anchors, reporters, etc.) from Germany, France, and other non-English-speaking countries. They all have good accents - easy to understand and pleasant.

The rule is: If you are close to the standard, you can always communicate, and your English will be pleasant. If you are far from the standard, sometimes you won't communicate successfully.

But how can you practice your pronunciation again and again by yourself?

➤ ***The secret is...**

[ESL PRO](#), our award-winning pronunciation program that will help you learn to speak English clearly and with confidence.

ESL PRO is the best English pronunciation-training program available. It is based on a unique linguistic approach to teaching correct pronunciation. It will improve your spoken English by helping you avoid common pronunciation mistakes from the very beginning. The program, developed by linguists and ESL/EFL professionals, has been used by over 250,000 teachers, students, and business people over the last decade. Impress your boss, teacher, or co-workers with your ability to speak beautiful English!

With [ESL PRO](#) you will:

- gain confidence in speaking English.
- enjoy over 50 hours of pronunciation practice.
- master all English sounds in 31 easy lessons.
- avoid common pronunciation errors with our tested learning system.
- learn through a combination of pictures, movies, and sounds.
- record your own voice and compare it to a native English speaker's voice.
- increase your vocabulary with our multimedia dictionary.

First, ESL PRO teaches you how to pronounce the basic sounds that make up English words. Then, you learn how to put these sounds together to form English words. As you go through each lesson, your English will get better and better.

Speaking English has never been so easy! Use ESL PRO, our award-winning pronunciation program, and learn to speak English clearly and with confidence! Anyone can use ESL PRO.

Questions & Answers about ESL PRO

➤ **Q: *Can adults use this program to correct their own speech problems?***

A: Yes. The process of correcting sounds is the same for children and adults. The progression of the lessons and what is taught are the same for both.

➤ **Q: *My child can say the sound if I ask him to say it. However, he never uses it when he talks. Is he just being lazy?***

A: No. Learning a new sound is a progression of steps that ultimately lead to using the sound in conversation. The fact that the child does not use the sound means that he is not yet ready. First, he must learn to use the sound at more basic levels. He moves to levels of increasing difficulty until he is ready to use the sound in conversation, the final level. English Pro software helps learners proceed from one level to the next.

➤ **Q: *Shouldn't speech therapy best be left to a speech pathologist?***

A: Yes and no. A child who has multiple articulation errors should be seen by a speech pathologist. The speech pathologist will know which sound to work on first and how to proceed to help the child attain normal speech. Speech therapy to correct any one sound is a simple process. The child succeeds at step one and from there moves on to step two, three, and so on. This process does not change no matter what the targeted sound. The Help Me Talk Right books allow anyone to proceed, just as a speech pathologist would.

➤ **Q: *Isn't it true that it is best to wait until a child is eight or nine before correcting the "s" or "r" sounds?***

A: Some speech pathologists feel that children younger than eight or nine are not developmentally ready to learn to say these sounds. The fact is that about 75% of all five-year old children use the "s" and "r" sounds in conversation. This is

clear proof that children far younger than eight are developmentally ready to use those sounds.

There are many good reasons not to wait. Many children are embarrassed about the way they talk. They know they sound different. Many children are teased because of their speech problems. Some children have trouble spelling because they spell a word the way they incorrectly say it. Also, the older a child gets the more they resent having to take the time to go to speech therapy. They resent the embarrassment of being pulled out of class for speech if they receive therapy in school. Private therapy, after school, may interfere with after-school activities the child loves. As a rule, waiting is not usually in the best interests of the child.

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