

How To Speak with a Person Who Has Limited English

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Introduction

Perhaps you took French or Spanish in high school. If you kept it up for several semesters, you may eventually have been able to read the language pretty well. You may have noticed that it's not quite so easy to write in that same language. Speaking it is harder still. But by far the most difficult is understanding the spoken language, especially as spoken by natives. Can you imagine yourself trying to cope in a country where that's the only language in use?

Now imagine yourself as an immigrant, thrust into a new country. Perhaps your only methods of learning the native language are ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, self-study, and constant exposure. If you're a child, mastery will come naturally. If you're older, it will be much harder, and you'll be busy just surviving. If you can picture yourself in that predicament, you may appreciate how helpful it would be if people would speak to you in a way that would be easier for you to grasp.

Native speech in any language is fast and sophisticated. We run our words together, but they're still perfectly understandable to a native speaker. We choose our words carefully to make subtle distinctions. To keep things interesting, we use metaphors and colorful phrasing. But when we're speaking with people whose English is limited, clear communication is what's most important. Sometimes that requires us to set aside our natural desire to be expressive. We may even need to compromise a little on expressing ourselves precisely.

A native speaker understands most simple sentences almost immediately. But for a person with limited English, it's a slow, conscious process that goes step by step. Each syllable and each word must be considered equally thoroughly, at least until the subject and verb have been located. Suppose he hears [Pleezeggzittheebilldeen]* over a PA system. He must work out where the word divisions are. Is it [Plee zegg] or [Pleez egg]? He probably recognizes [Pleez] as "Please". Then is it [egg zit] or [eggzit]? Maybe [eggzit] is "exit", but then again it might be the word "egg" followed by a word that starts with the sound [zit]. He can't think of any words in his vocabulary that start with [zit], so he has "Please exit" so far. Fortunately that's enough to convey the meaning of the announcement, so he doesn't have to wonder whether the next part is [theeb ill]

* I use square brackets [] to enclose a simple form of phonetic spelling. In other words, what's inside the brackets indicates how the spoken word, phrase, or sentence is pronounced.

or [thee bill], or struggle to recognize [bildeen] (which is how we really say it) as “building”. Now imagine how he would struggle with a question I once heard a nurse ask a patient who barely understood English:
[Howmuchwaytavyoogayndsinsweesawyoollast?]

The guidelines below will help you speak clearly and simply when confronted with a language barrier. They’re intended for people who regularly come in contact with the public. This includes teachers, salespeople, police, doctors and nurses, emergency medical technicians, social workers, pharmacists, auto mechanics, security guards, people at registration desks, and many more. If you meet people from all walks of life, you’ll sometimes find yourself trying to communicate with a person who is struggling with English. With the help of these guidelines, you should be able to make it a better encounter for both of you.

I hasten to point out that these guidelines are not based on research of any kind. I haven’t done studies to determine whether some approaches work better than others, and I’m not even aware of any other literature on this topic. These recommendations are based mostly on my experiences with one ESL student, along with introspective observations of my own language analysis thought processes.

Identifying the Need

Don’t assume on the basis of anyone’s appearance that they *will* have any trouble speaking or understanding English. Wait until you hear them speak. If you’re the first to speak, watch for signs that they don’t understand what you’ve said. Given this first indication of difficulty, watch for these further clues:

- Accent (from a non-English-speaking country). Now it’s true that many people speak excellent English with an accent. But it’s also true that anyone who has trouble with English as a second language is almost certainly going to have an accent. In short, if there’s no accent, there’s no language problem; if there *is* an accent, there *may* be a language problem. Note that an accent is the way one *pronounces* words, as well as cadence and pitch pattern. It’s not related to the way words are *used*.
- Use of the present tense only
 - I have an accident yesterday. Tomorrow I call the insurance company.
- Incorrect use of prepositions
 - I’m hard to hearing.
 - My birthday is on March, in the 13th.

- I went to DMV for renew my license.
- I came back to home.
- I saw a movie in TV.
- They laughed of him.
- Use of words with almost, but not quite, the correct meaning
 - Getting my car fixed is very trouble.
 - He said [or “sayed”] me what to do.
 - The mailman is such late today.
 - I didn’t see some pencils in the box.
- Use of irregular verbs as if they were regular
 - She buyed some potatoes.
 - I caught the cat, but it bited me.
- Omission of articles and possessive pronouns
 - Put turkey in oven.
 - I lost glasses.
- Use of a non-standard word order for questions
 - I can cash a check here?

Here are three final clues that a person may have limited use of English. But use caution; these usages are also common with some native English speakers.

- Omission of helping verbs, such as “be” and “do”, in verb phrases
 - What you want?
 - They going now.
- Omission of the verb “to be” as the main verb
 - She at home.
 - I hungry.

- Use of the wrong verb form for third person singular present tense (dropping the “s”)
 - The car need oil.
 - My dog always bring the stick back.

But the main thing is to be alert for any sign that you are not being understood. If the listener obviously has no trouble understanding you, do not change the way you talk; in fact, doing so might seem patronizing. And there may be a middle ground, where there is only a little difficulty in understanding; in this case, you may need to make only slight changes. In other words, use these guidelines judiciously.

As in all things, be respectful. Whatever language difficulties you may be dealing with, they are not likely to be the result of stupidity. In fact, the person who is struggling so hard to speak and understand is probably at least as smart as you are, and teeming with observations and witticisms that can’t be expressed.

How To Speak

- Speak slowly – but not too slowly.
- Pronounce each word separately and distinctly. This is crucial; you want to help the listener determine how to group the syllables into words. And each word should be pronounced the way it’s taught in school, not in the slurred pronunciation of everyday chatter.

*I must stress that this is very different from normal speech; it will **not** come naturally to you.* If you want to say “I’m going to get some water”, you might normally say [Ahmgonnagetsumwata] or even [Ahgawgisuhwa]. Yes, we really do sometimes talk like that. In the situation we’re discussing here, you should say [Eye-am-goeen-too-get-sum-wahter], where each “-” represents a brief but distinct pause between words.

- Use the simplest and clearest wording.
 - Instead of “How come?” or “What for?”, say “Why?”
 - Instead of “He’s got an umbrella”, say “He has an umbrella.”
 - Instead of “You must make up your mind”, say “You must decide.”
 - Instead of “quite a few”, say “many”
 - Instead of “Step on it!”, say “Hurry!”
 - Instead of “You don’t say!”, say “Is that true?”

- Instead of “How are we feeling today?”, say “How are you feeling today?”
- Use simple verb tenses. Your listener will probably understand the past, present, and future tenses, for both regular and irregular verbs, even if he or she finds it difficult to use them when speaking. Unless you get the impression that you’re not getting through, you can say, “I saw the movie” or “He will pay the bill.” But except for the use of “will” to form the future tense, avoid verb *phrases* and the tenses that require them. The following sentence is just asking for trouble: “If I had not received my check, I would not have been able to pay my rent.” A semi-capable non-native listener may pick out “check” and “rent” as the important words, along with a couple of “not”s; but that’s not enough to grasp the meaning of the sentence. Try rephrasing it as “I have my check. Now I can pay my rent.” It doesn’t mean exactly the same thing, but it’s close enough. English is capable of distinguishing subtle differences in meaning; but subtlety is a luxury we can’t afford when we’re struggling just to make ourselves understood.
- Where practical, express questions as statements, short phrases, or even single words followed by a question mark.
 - Instead of “Do you have enough pills?”, say “You have enough pills?”
 - Instead of “Are you feeling any pain?”, say “Any pain?”
 - Instead of “Would you like some candy?”, say “Candy?”

In the original wording of the first example, “do” is a simple function word with no real additional meaning other than to facilitate putting the question into the usual word order. But a person with limited English does not immediately grasp the sentence structure as a whole, and begins by trying to translate each word in order. The first word is “do”, and until proven otherwise, it has to be assumed to have as much significance as the words that follow it. Ditto with “are” and “would” in the other two examples.

- When speaking about obligations, use “must” (which is unambiguous) instead of “have to” or “supposed to”. “Must” is unambiguous. “Have to” may lead the listener to think you’re talking about possession. The fact that “have to” is usually pronounced [haff too] instead of [hav too] is a subtle distinction that might easily be missed. “Supposed to” is longer and less likely to be part of a limited vocabulary.
 - Instead of “I have to stay until 5:00”, say “I must stay until 5:00.”
 - Instead of “First, the oven has to get hot”, say “First, the oven must get hot.”

- Instead of “You’re supposed to keep your door locked”, say “You must keep your door locked” (or simply “Keep your door locked.”)
- Speaking about *negative* obligations and non-obligations is trickier. If “must” conveys an obligation, what does “must not” mean? A person with limited English might take “You must not park here” (a negative obligation) to mean “You don’t have to park here” (a non-obligation). It’s clearer to say “Do not park here.” To express a non-obligation, the best wording might be “You do not need to . . .” or even “You can . . . if you want.” Try to find a simple, non-ambiguous rewording.
 - Instead of “You must not fill out the form with pencil”, you could say “You must fill out the form with a pen” or “It is *not* okay to use pencil; use a pen.”
 - Instead of “You don’t have to wear a tie”, you might say “You can wear a tie if you want” or “A tie is okay; and *no* tie is okay.”

Don’t worry if the clearest, simplest wording also sounds a bit awkward by ordinary standards. It won’t be held against you.

- As you speak, try to monitor yourself; imagine how you might be misinterpreted. If you’re preparing to say, “We don’t have any idea when it’ll be in”, you might stop and realize that “don’t” and “it’ll” are contractions that might be confusing (more on this later). In addition, “don’t have any idea” is an idiom that is not likely to be understood, and the meaning of “in” might not be clear in this context. Rephrase the statement as “We do not know when it will be here.” Of course, “know” sounds like “no”, but not all ambiguity can be avoided, and here the context should clarify the intent.
- Hand gestures can be helpful, but they should probably be used only when they will greatly speed comprehension. Spoken language, even if restricted to simple forms, is much more expressive than gestures. But if it will help, don’t hesitate to point toward objects or people, or to mimic activities such as talking on the telephone or driving.

How Not To Speak

- Don’t think speaking louder will help.
- Don’t think you have to sound like a bad Tarzan movie. For example, you may assume, at least until you have more information, that your listener knows the simple pronouns and all forms of the present tense of the verb “to be” (am, is, are).
 - Instead of “Me Jane”, say “I am Jane.”

- If you're not understood, don't just repeat the same wording in the same way. Either rephrase, or slow down and separate your words.
- Don't use contractions! Avoid them at all costs! "Is not", "can not", and "does not" are much more easily understood than "isn't", "can't", and "doesn't". Listen to the difference in pronunciation; the unstressed, vowelless "nt" sound is easily missed. There's also a possibility of confusion when using "I'd", "you're", "he'll", "we've", "who's" and so on. Some double contractions are common in English, such as "I wouldn't've done that", but would be incomprehensible to a person with limited English. (In fact, many native English speakers, while understanding the meaning perfectly well, think the phrase is "wouldn't of".)
 - Instead of "It isn't six o'clock yet" or "It's not six o'clock yet", say "It is not six o'clock yet."
 - Instead of "I'll meet you there", say "I will meet you there."
 - Instead of "I've seen that movie", say "I have seen that movie" or "I saw that movie already."

An exception is the word "let's". This is pretty well recognized as the beginning of what, technically, is a first-person plural ("we") imperative (command). De-contracting it to "let us" is unlikely to help. It should be okay to say "Let's go!" But if it isn't understood, try "We go now!"

- Don't use slang or idioms.
 - Instead of "Beats me!", say "I don't know."
 - Instead of "before long", say "soon".
 - Instead of "Easy does it!", say "Be careful!"
 - Instead of "Give me a hand!", say "Please help me!"
 - Instead of "Looks like you don't have any sweat", say "You will not have any trouble."
 - Instead of "Let's grab a bite", say "Let's eat lunch." If that gets a blank stare, try "We eat lunch now?"
- Don't use cute phrasing; your smile is enough.
 - Instead of "Hop up on this scale", say "Please step on this scale."
 - Instead of "I'm going to the little boys' room", say "I am going to the bathroom."

- Don't use circuitous phrasing.
 - Instead of "Are you going to want the large size?", say "Do you want the large size?" or "You want the large size?"
 - Instead of "What will we be having for dinner tonight?" (waiter to restaurant customer), ask "What would you like to order for dinner?" And instead of "Are you still working on that?", say "Are you finished?" or even just "Finished?"
 - Instead of "I wouldn't do that if I were you", say "Do not do that" or maybe "That is not a good thing to do."
- Don't use verbal short cuts that omit the most important words.
 - Instead of "Social?", say "May I have your social security number?" or just "Social security number?"
 - Instead of "Don't drink", say "Don't drink beer, wine, or alcohol."
 - Instead of "Paper or plastic?", ask "Paper bags, or plastic bags?"
- Don't use metaphors. This might be a hard rule to follow. Metaphors are common in everyday speech, and we use them without thinking about the fact that they're figures of speech. But a person who is not familiar with them will try to interpret them literally. Imagine how these might be interpreted:
 - It's a piece of cake.
 - She's my old flame.
 - Do you think my tie is too loud?
 - I'm down in the dumps.
 - Don't get bent out of shape.
 - Are you pulling my leg?

At best, a listener who is not thoroughly acquainted with our culture, but knows what a metaphor is in general, must decide if the statement *is* a metaphor and if so, what the intended meaning is. At worst, the listener will attempt a literal interpretation, with no good result.

- Don't use similes (using "like" or "as") unless they're perfectly clear. "As easy as pie" makes no sense literally, except perhaps to an accomplished pastry chef; just say "easy".

- Instead of “working like a dog”, say “working hard”.
- Instead of “as blind as a bat”, say “blind”.
- Instead of “as dead as a doornail”, say “dead”.

On the other hand, there’s nothing wrong with “as hard as rock” or “as cold as ice”, except that it would be simpler just to say “hard” or “cold”.

- Don’t even bring up anything that’s unnecessary.
 - Instead of “Did you find everything you were looking for?” (cashier to customer), say nothing, or give a simple greeting.
 - Instead of “How are you doing today?”, just say “Hello!”

How To Listen

- Remember that the use of a present tense verb might be intended as past tense or future tense. “I eat my lunch at home” might mean “I already ate my lunch” or “I’m planning to eat my lunch later when I get home.” Of course, it might even be meant as it sounds: “I usually eat my lunch at home.” You must decide from the context, or seek clarification.
- Don’t jump to conclusions; ask questions to get a clearer picture. If the meaning sounds clear but just wrong, don’t panic. Try to find a more reasonable interpretation. “Can you help me go to the bathroom?” clearly is not meant the way it sounds. Clarify by asking “You want to know where the bathroom is?” If you are told, “My car not go”, try a few different interpretations, pausing after each, to see if anything clicks: “Your car has no gas? Your car has a bad battery? Your car has a flat tire?”
- If a statement sounds as if it is intended to have a question mark after it (i.e., it ends with a rising pitch), accept it as a question. “I sign my name here?” probably means “Should I sign my name here?”
- Don’t be misled by the use of a singular noun when the plural would seem more appropriate. Some languages (e.g., Chinese) don’t have a plural form. “I took test” might mean “I took some tests.”
- Consider both possibilities if “must” is used with “not”. If you hear “You must not make your bed”, maybe it really means “You don’t have to make your bed.”
- If the person speaking uses hand gestures, do your best to interpret them. Some gestures may be obscure. Tapping on a bare forearm while talking about a third person may be a reference to that person’s skin color, i.e., race. Holding both arms straight out with the wrists together may be a reference to

being arrested (with handcuffs). If you have any doubt what a gesture means, repeat it in words.

- Don't try to improve the speaker's English. Stick to the task of basic communication.
- On the other hand, as mentioned previously, it may be useful to rephrase what you have heard, as a way of making sure you understand. If the speaker happens to learn something about English in the process, that's a bonus.

Conclusion

When you have the opportunity to speak with a person whose knowledge of English is limited, speak clearly. Pronounce each word slowly and separately. Use the simplest possible wording to get your meaning across. As you formulate each sentence before speaking it, ask yourself, "How could this wording be misinterpreted?" If you follow these guidelines, the conversation should go more smoothly, and the two of you will have a brighter day.