

Smart English Grammar



Listening to Real English

by Maureen Bouey & Dahlia Miller

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7 Secrets to Fluent English



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Secret #1

by Maureen Bouey

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“Minds are like parachutes. They only function when they are open.”

Sir James Dewar, Scientist (1877-1925)

Congratulations on taking this step towards being a more fluent English speaker. Many ESL students wonder if it is possible to learn to speak English fluently, like a native speaker. The answer is: Yes! Is it easy? No. But it is possible.

We believe that you signed up to take this course, because you are a person who is ready and willing to learn. Are we right? You will reach your goals with English if you are:

- a) committed to working as hard as you can, and
- b) open to new ideas and concepts.

If you faithfully practice what we suggest, you will begin to notice an improvement in your English.

Ok, are you ready?

We have a lot of ground to cover... so let's get started!

SECRET #1: If you want to speak English fluently, you first must:

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN,

and then...

LISTEN SOME MORE!

This is the first thing you do when learning a new language – and it is essential to good speaking ability.

Are you surprised? Well, it's really true; the more you listen, the sooner you will be a fluent English speaker. Lots of listening will also lead to a better (more “natural”) accent.

Many students have said to us, “I don't understand; how can listening help me become a better speaker?”

Well, how did you learn to speak your own first language? When you were a baby, did your parents sit down with you and begin to explain the basics of grammar in your native language? Did they try to teach you to read or write when you were still crawling around on the floor?

Of course they didn't! They just talked to you, and to each other, and to lots of other people.

And what did you do? You listened.

Sometimes you listened passively, and sometimes you listened with conscious effort, paying attention to the sounds, rhythms and patterns of speech that were all around you, and trying to understand.

The important thing is, you were immersed in your language – in other words it was all around you. You were like a fish swimming in water.

For a couple of years, you continued to listen. Then, eventually, (probably somewhere around the age of 2) you started to speak. Everyone got very excited of course, including you - but remember - by that time, you had been listening for a very long time!

First you listened; then you spoke. “Obviously,” you say? Yes, but it's a very important relationship. Let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time, there was a quite extraordinary Japanese man who was a contemporary of Albert Einstein's. (As it happens, they were also good friends.)

In the 1930's, this remarkable man discovered what he called “the mother tongue” method of learning. In his book *Nurtured By Love*, Shinichi Suzuki explains how he came to understand how people learn language. It suddenly occurred to him one day that “all Japanese children can speak Japanese!”(1) Of course this seemed obvious to everyone, and some people looked at him oddly when he announced this. But what he really meant was that human beings have a natural ability and a “talent” to learn a complicated and difficult language – just by listening to it!

This insight showed him an important link between how we ‘receive’ information, and how we ‘produce’ it. He was a violin teacher, and he began to use this method of language learning to teach young children (3 and 4 years old!) the violin. First, he let them listen to a particular piece of music for several weeks. Then, after a while, they were able to play the piece themselves – without knowing how to read music yet.

This method of teaching became known as “The Suzuki Method” and is now used world-wide.

It makes sense, right? First we listen, then we speak, then we read, and then we write. But we listen first; it’s the natural order.

“Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.”

Albert Einstein

Your speaking ability (both fluency and pronunciation) will improve if you will listen, listen, listen. Make no mistake – you can improve your English this way no matter what level of English you are at right now: whether you are an absolute beginner or at a much higher level.

“How much listening does it take to make a difference in your speaking?” That’s a very good question! The answer is, “it depends.” We are all so different; we have varied backgrounds, experiences, talents, and abilities, some people will need to do more listening and some people need to do less to achieve the same results.

The simple and true answer is this: “the more the better.” And even more importantly: “the more often, and the more consistent, the better.”

So, there we have it! That’s the first secret - being a good listener will help make you a better speaker. And the great thing about listening is you can practice it just about anywhere! If you have an ipod, you can carry your listening practice with you on the bus, train, subway, car or plane.

Of course, it’s true that those of you who are spending some time in an English-speaking country will have many more opportunities to overhear English. But wherever you are, try to expose yourself to a variety of different voices – just like when you were a baby learning your first language. The more you do this, the better! Here is a list of some suggestions for you to try. We know you’ll find more!

- Listen to English TV stations or programs. Try closing your eyes sometimes. This will challenge you to “hear” more – especially to hear the rhythm and intonation in natural speech.
- Watch English videos (it’s much better to not have subtitles!).
- Listen to English radio – you can do this anywhere in the world (BBC/CBC/Voice of America, etc.)
- Listen to songs – practice singing along!
- Listen to recordings of books.
- As you are walking down the street, listen for English.
- Listen to conversations in coffee shops, on the bus, at parties...

- When you hear a few English words, repeat them to yourself. Repeat them again and again. Can you understand what was said?”
- The Internet. This is a great source – there are literally HUNDREDS of helpful sites for you to listen and practice. Here are just a couple to start with:
<http://www.esl-lab.com/>
<http://home.gwu.edu/~meloni/eslstudyhall/shlistening.htm>
<http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/>

These are just some ideas – the important thing is to listen OFTEN and to listen CONSISTENTLY. 10 minutes every day is better than 1 hour per week.

“A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he gets to know something.”
Wilson Mizner

See you next time with Secret # 2! Until then, keep listening!

Maureen Bouey is an ESL teacher in Victoria, BC, Canada. She is the co-author of Smart English Grammar – Real English Listening – Intermediate with Dahlia Miller.

(1) Nurtured By Love: Suzuki, Shinichi. Exposition Press, New York, 1969 (p.9)

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