

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 #3

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by Maureen Bouey

Well, so far we've looked at the importance of listening and reading – the two 'receptive' skills. Have you been practicing these? If you have, congratulations! You have taken important steps towards fluent English.

Come with us while we explore the next important secret to speaking English. Secret #3 is actually more about something you should NOT do. What is it? Read on!

SECRET #3: FORGET ABOUT GRAMMAR

What? How can you possibly forget about grammar!? Forgetting about grammar is very important for becoming fluent in English.

Well, of course you need some grammar. SOME.

But I'm willing to bet my last dollar that you've already got enough – and probably you have a lot of it. I'm even willing to bet that you could more than likely beat almost ANY native English speaker in a grammar contest. I really mean that because, you see, most native English speakers don't understand grammar very well at all.

You all know someone (maybe it's you), who can get a very high score on a grammar test, but can't speak or understand any English. Does that really seem like a successful model of language learning? It would be like completely understanding the theory of music, the structure of music, and what all the notes and little marks mean, but...almost never actually playing music (or singing). It wouldn't make much sense, would it?

"To learn it, do it!"

Roger Schank

You see, having perfect English grammar does NOT mean you can speak English fluently. In fact, the two are not really related at all. If having excellent grammar meant speaking English fluently, many Asian students would already be able to do it. Why Asian students particularly? Because, as an ESL teacher, I have seen hundreds of Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese and other Asian students come to Canada with quite a high level of grammar. Sometimes they have written the TOEIC or even the TOEFL and gotten a very high score.

But...they often have trouble having a real conversation. That's because, if you actually want to speak English, and understand English, only practicing grammar is not going to make a difference. Not really.

Let's think for a minute: What is grammar? What is any kind of grammar – in any language? Well, it's structure, isn't it? It's all the basics. In the case of English grammar this means knowing what the seven parts of speech (articles, prepositions, nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions) are, and knowing how to put them together.

So for instance, you learn that you always need (at least) two things to form every sentence – a noun and a verb. For example: “Dogs run.” You might want to add more information - about the dogs, perhaps, so you can add an adjective. “Young dogs run.” And, you might want to add more information about “how” they run, so you could add an adverb. “Young dogs run quickly.” Certainly understanding these basics are important to your ability to “move around” and “build” in English.

However, past a certain point, you need to let go of your attempts to be more and more “perfect” at putting the pieces together, and just USE the language.

You may think your English is not very good yet, but if you can understand some English – and if you can get people to understand you, then isn't that the whole point?

And, although you really DO need to know the basics of structure - or grammar - learning more and more and more detail is not going to improve your fluency. The ONLY thing which will improve your fluency is...practice using the tools. And that is...speaking, listening, reading and writing. These are the skills of a language – and the whole purpose to learning it.

“But I make a lot of mistakes!” “My pronunciation is not good,” many students say. Well, of course you make mistakes! First of all, everyone – and I mean EVERYONE – makes mistakes. This means ALL native speakers, including English teachers. Making mistakes is a normal part of being human and speaking a language. Second, you make mistakes because you're learning something.

Making mistakes is a normal part of the learning process. Learning and making mistakes go together - automatically. Just like in an old song called “Love and Marriage”. “Love and marriage; Love and marriage; Go together like a horse and carriage.” “A horse and carriage?” Well I said it was an old song. Anyway, making mistakes is a huge and important part of learning. In fact...if you aren't making mistakes, you probably aren't learning.

Just for a moment, imagine something, will you? Great! Imagine that you are taking care of a one-year-old baby. It might be your own baby; it might be a niece or a nephew, or a friend's baby. It doesn't matter. In any case, you're looking after this one-year-old baby. The baby can't walk yet – it can only crawl. As you are sitting in a chair, the baby crawls over to you and, using a small, nearby table, pulls himself up to a standing position. The baby smiles at you and you smile back. He is very encouraged by your smile and wants to come over to you. So, he lets go of the table, and takes a step. You smile and hold your hands out in encouragement, so he laughs and takes another step. You clap your hands and laugh with happiness. The baby takes one more step and then...falls down!

Ok, here's my point: is the baby's fall a mistake? Or is it normal? In this situation, how do you respond to the baby? Do you feel disappointed that he failed? Do you scold him? Do you say "Oh no, you can't do it!"? Or, do you feel excited because the baby tried and succeeded (he walked two steps!).

Of course, this is a bit of a trick question. I know you are a kind, caring person and you would be supportive and encouraging of the baby - because the fact is, he succeeded, didn't he? He is in a process of learning a new skill and he will fall down many times. Of course. Just as you will make many mistakes –that's how you know you're learning. That's how you know you're PROGRESSING.

So, remember, grammar is a tool. It is a tool to fit the pieces of a language together. The whole point to learning any language is to use the language - not to master the tools of structure.

Remember, we are not saying you don't need to study grammar at all. It has its place. What we are saying is, put it aside sometimes. Just listen. Read. And speak. Good luck!

Until next time,

“Just do it!”

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See you next time with Secret # 4!

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.

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