

# 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 #4

by Maureen Bouey

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How have you been doing? Are you listening to some English every day? Are you reading (at least some) English every day? Almost every day? If not, remember, even as little as ten minutes a day - especially if it's regular and consistent - will really help you on your road to fluency. So even if you're very busy, if you're serious about improving your English, you should make just a few minutes available to do these valuable activities.

All right then. On to the next topic: Secret #4 to speaking fluent English!

SECRET #4: SPEAK  
(ENGLISH, of course)

My dear student, you simply must speak!

And I mean speak often. You should be speaking English at every opportunity, and you should be taking every advantage that comes your way to practice speaking English.

You should speak even when you are uncomfortable, and you should speak when you aren't quite sure you will be understood by other people. And,

You must speak EVEN if you feel shy - and I know many of you do. Is this you - are you shy? Do you sometimes avoid speaking because you feel shy? Well, listen carefully and I'll tell you what I always tell my students: "Shyness is expensive." What do I mean by that? Just this: the cost of shyness = the loss of an opportunity to speak. And, when it comes to language fluency, opportunities for speaking practice are pure gold. This is true in any language of course, not just English. When it comes to learning a language, practice is what builds fluency.

Did you get that? I'll repeat it because it's so important.

PRACTICE is what builds fluency.

It is absolutely extraordinary how seldom many, many ESL/EFL students actually DO speak. And not speaking is a vicious cycle. They don't speak because they can't, and they can't speak because they don't. It doesn't make sense, does it?

Well, it's a simple fact, you CANNOT become fluent any other way. Think about it. Speaking practice is how you became fluent in your first language. Practice is how EVERYONE becomes fluent – whether it is their first, second, third, or tenth language. It is the ONLY way.

To return to shyness again for a moment, if you ARE shy, I know that this aspect of language learning is harder for you (perhaps much harder). And I'll be honest with you: those of you who are naturally outgoing and sociable definitely DO have an easier time of it in this area.

But don't worry, it's not time to throw in the towel (this is an idiom that means 'give up'). If you are shy, you'll just have to work a little harder. You'll have to push past your feelings of discomfort and force yourself to participate verbally in situations. You CAN do it.

“You don't understand me,” you might think.

But I do. Believe me: I can sympathize with shy students. I know how difficult it is because for many, many years, I was shy too. I do understand; I am speaking from personal experience. I know very well what the reluctance to speak feels like – AND, I know the price you can pay - because I paid it.

I won't bore you with my story, but I lost many social and learning opportunities due to my shyness, and it wasted a lot of time. That's all I'll say on this at the moment. This is a whole topic of its own, but let me just say this, you CAN overcome it. I did. And it doesn't mean completely changing your personality.

I think this fourth secret to speaking fluent English is, in some ways, the most obvious. Maybe it doesn't really seem like a 'secret'. Yet, so many students do not speak. Instead, even in a conversation class, they look down and focus their attention on their notebooks or dictionaries. Instead of asking a teacher for information, for example, they will look in their (bilingual) dictionary. Sometimes they'll ask a friend or a classmate – but often, the question is not even asked in English.

*“A different language is a different vision of life.”*

Federico Fellini, Italian Film Director

This quote from the famous Italian director is so true. Language is a part of culture, and so to make a real connection with a language, it is important to participate in the culture as much as possible. HOW you can do this depends on whether you are currently in an English speaking country or in your own country.

If you are in your own country, you clearly won't have as many English speaking opportunities as you will if you are in a country where English is spoken as an official language. But you will have some speaking opportunities. The obvious one, of course, is that you can join a language school.

If you do join a language school, it is much better for you if you can be taught by native English speakers.

Also, try to make sure the school has a good conversation program, and that they don't just teach grammar and how to study for tests. You could even ask the staff if they use the "Communicative" style of teaching (1) there. But remember, once you're in the language school, it's up to you. Nobody can FORCE you to speak; you have to do that for yourself.

What else can you do? Well, that largely depends on where you are. Aside from language schools, try to participate in as many activities as possible that give you speaking opportunities. Try to think about where there are native speakers, and look for opportunities to speak there. Where do they eat? Where do they drink their coffee or beer? Where do they relax? Be creative.

If, however, you are in an English speaking country, you have a much larger number of options. (And I highly recommend you take advantage of them while you are there!) Again, you may want to join a language school. Or, you may want to attend a regular school if you are at a high enough level. There are so many possibilities and ideas. Here are just a few; you probably have more:

- Go to a gym (the YMCA or YWCA is always a good choice)
- Take a class - any class: art; cooking; photography; music; (whatever interests you!)
- Join a conversation club
- Volunteer (they will be VERY happy to see you!)
- Go to church
- Live with a homestay family (NOT with students from your own country)
- Travel
- Go Shopping and ask the sales clerks a lot of questions

Basically, go where the English speakers go.

*"Language is a steed which carries you into a far country."*

Arab proverb

Please believe me, there is no shortcut. So, remember, watch for opportunities, actually look for opportunities. Make your own opportunities. Ask questions. Don't worry, just speak.

\*Note: It's a fact in our world that things are a little different for males and females. Unfortunately, if you are a girl, or a woman, you have to be more cautious and can't speak to just anyone - anytime.

See you next time with Secret # 5!

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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