

Backpacker's Guide to Teaching English



★ **CONVERSATION** ★



JUDY THOMPSON



SEP 2010
DEPARTURE

1234
RUSSIA
IMMIGRATION
1234

15 DEC
2010

20
AUG
2016
ARRIVAL
0:12:2010

09 MAY

ARRIVAL
INDIA

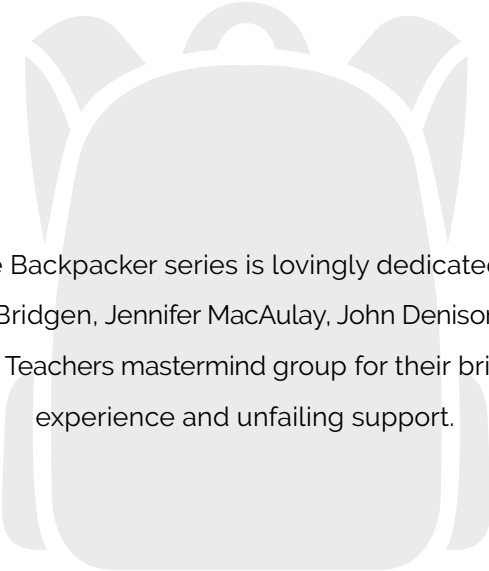
BRAZIL

0123
CHINA
20 AUG 2016
DEPARTED
123

CANADA
AUG 2016

20
USA ARRIVED

ARRIVAL
★ ABCD



The Backpacker series is lovingly dedicated to
Noreen Bridgen, Jennifer MacAulay, John Denison and my
Radical Teachers mastermind group for their brilliance,
experience and unfailing support.



JUDY THOMPSON

Backpacker's Guide to Teaching English



★ CONVERSATION ★



All rights reserved. This work is the intellectual property of the author. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests, write to the author at
judy@thompsonlanguagecenter.com

Thompson Language Center
Niagara Falls, Canada

Copyright © 2018 by Judy Thompson. Second Edition 2021.

Developed in Canada

ISBN: 978-0-9812058-5-4

CIP available upon request.

Every effort has been made to trace ownership of all copyrighted material and to secure permission from copyright holders. In the event of any question arising as to the use of any material, we would be pleased to make the necessary corrections in future printings.

Edited by: Noreen Brigden and Jennifer MacAulay

Cover design by: McCorkindale Advertising & Design

Layout and Production by: McCorkindale Advertising & Design

Printed in USA (subject to change)



Contents

Conversation	7
Introduction	8
The Purpose of this Book	9
1) The Secret to Pronunciation	34
2) Listening Faster	39
3) Speaking isn't Writing Said Out Loud	50
My Story	11
Turn the Telescope Around	12
Breakdown Number One is the Alphabet	12
Breakdown Number Two is Grammar	13
What You Missed from Book One	17
Backstory on Words	20
Words	22
Simple Pronunciation System	23
The Secret to Intelligibility in English is Stress	25
Harvest What is the Same	31
Inching Closer to Teaching Fast Listening	34
Chapter 1:	
How to Figure Out Pronunciation	34
Chapter 2:	
Listening Faster	39
Pausing	45
Chapter 3:	
How Words Run Together	50
Conclusion	58



SEP 2010
DEPARTURE

15 DEC
2010

RUSSIA
IMMIGRATION

1234

20
AUG
2016

09 MAY

ARRIVAL
0:12:2010



ARRIVAL
INDIA

BRAZIL



0123

CHINA
20 AUG 2016
DEPARTED
123



CANADA

AUG 2016

ARRIVAL



USA ARRIVED

20

Backpacker's Guide to Teaching English



Book Two Conversation By Judy Thompson

Learners don't need you; they can communicate successfully with the English they have now.

Circumstances create informal English instructors that the English as a Second Language (ESL) industry calls Backpackers. Although the term was originally coined for travelers, it can apply to volunteers, refugee hosts, any people with no special teacher training who find themselves in a position to assist non-native speakers improve their English but with no idea how to do it. While coaching with no formal training sounds like a brazen, formidable task, it isn't. It's a snap. And having no special education for it is a blessing in disguise. Judy Thompson



Introduction

There is a very modest set of rules for pronouncing words **intelligibly**, and there are predictable patterns for how words run together in English dialogue. **Backpackers** and pretty much anyone who can read can effectively assist non-native speakers acquiring the simple tools they need to independently survive, then thrive, in English conversation. Regardless of your education or theirs, to coach learners in successfully speaking English, you'll need this book and a giant elastic band. No kidding.

English can be intimidating. Popular myth has English as *one of the most difficult languages to learn*. Fortunately, that's just a story perpetuated by the education industry to excuse itself from teaching it so badly. In truth, English is the boiled down combination of many languages, the process of which rendered English as one of the simplest languages but with the largest vocabulary. Informal teachers shine when they understand the **simple patterns** of English that are **always true** and how to harvest what is the same about English and any learner's first language. Informal teachers (Backpackers) avoid the *way-we-have-always-done-it* dogma and focus instead on the **unwritten rules of spoken English** to give learners a fighting chance to participate confidently in the English-speaking world as quickly as possible.

The system presented here is not about accent reduction, it's about intelligibility and effectiveness.

The Purposes of this Book

In *Need for Speed* are the secrets to **teaching the three critical skills** necessary for **conversing confidently** with strangers. You, hence your students, will know::

- 1** how to **figure out** and **remember** the **pronunciation** of words without a teacher
- 2** the **main event**, which is the significance of **Important Words** for **fast listening**
- 3** **why** spoken English never resembles vocabulary students have studied */ja no wha dly meen?/,* which is just plain fun.

Age-old language mysteries are revealed in this compelling little volume. After a dozen or so pages of fascinating backstory, the three critical skills above will be revealed.

Fasten your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy ride.



My Story

I grew up on a farm, raised my children on a farm, made my living training horses before my youngest child got on a school bus, and then I went back to college to become an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. There are a number of parallels between teaching English and training horses. Students and steeds are magnificent creatures who communicate perfectly without English. I started my teaching career late but with a remarkable array of soft, transferable skills.

What I learned from training horses is there is a simple system for teaching horses based on the way horses think. Early in that career, I realized horses will do anything you ask as long as five conditions are met: the trainer must be higher than the horse in the pecking order (horses are herd animals), the request must be clear and not too difficult, and the animal can't be in pain or afraid. It will just do whatever you want if all these conditions are met.

People are not horses, but our brains work best under specific conditions as well. My years in the education system taught me that a traditional grammar-based language education runs counter to the way humans process information, which accounts for the historically poor results. It became my life's mission to identify the blueprint for human conversation, prioritize the elements, and teach the system in an interesting way.

The genesis of this simplistic approach hit me like a thunderbolt one ordinary day in my Adult ESL Literacy class. While the rest of the class was busy practicing printing, a shy new student approached my desk and asked, "Teacher, you me vashroom?" Without hesitation, I nodded and said, "Sure" and she headed out the door. WAIT A SECOND! Her request totally violated every grammar and pronunciation rule I had been trained to teach, yet I understood her perfectly. If conversation isn't pronunciation or grammar-based, how does conversation work? It turned out to be one of those ordinary days after which my life would never be the same. By the end of this book, you too will know the real patterns that run English conversation, and your life won't be the same either. You can take that to the bank.



Turn the Telescope Around

Approach English as simple and see how well students do! The challenge with English is not that it is difficult — it isn't. The way English has been taught is the problem. Here is a quick and dirty two-part explanation for **how teaching English became so arduous and complex.**

Breakdown Number One is the alphabet. It doesn't make sense. In 1476, a no-account businessman made himself rich by writing English down in the laziest, most short-sighted way possible. He took the nearest alphabet, which was Latin (ABC) with only 26 letters, and willynilly wrote English down. It might have worked, except English uses 40+ sounds. Doing the math, he left at least 14 sounds without their own letters. **One symbol per sound is the purpose of an alphabet.** William Caxton made a mess. English spelling has always been random. To make matters worse, in 1603, all his spelling mistakes were collected into a big fat book called the dictionary. Yes, we have been copying one man's spelling mistakes for over 500 years. The cornerstone of our education system is what I like to call the BBM, the Big Book of Mistakes.

The negative impact of the gaping chasm Caxton created between written and spoken English is that he made teaching either close to impossible. Almost 40% of native English speakers (regardless of their English-speaking country of origin) are functionally illiterate — **they can't read.** Non-native speakers study English for decades and **can't speak** for the same reason — the alphabet doesn't make sense. Don't worry, it's all fixed. The first book in this series, *Cracking the Code*, solved **pronunciation** with a functional phonetic alphabet to represent English **sounds.**

Reading and writing use ABCs; listening and speaking use EPA (English Phonetic Alphabet) — easy peasy.

Breakdown Number Two is grammar. It's a hauntingly familiar tale. A no-account clergyman by the name of Robert Louth wrote

"A Short Introduction to English Grammar" published in 1762 enjoyed a long and disastrously influential life..." Bill Bryson - The Mother Tongue.

The tragedy is Mr. Louth didn't write about English grammar at all; it was Latin grammar he documented and switched out the name in the title. You can't make this stuff up.

"Trying to fit English grammar into Latin grammar rules is like trying to play baseball using football rules" Bill Bryson - The Mother Tongue.

Unchecked, education has been passing off the wrong set of grammar rules as *English grammar* for over 250 years. Although it is very bad for students, it has been a fantastically lucrative business model for publishers and educators.

It's a New Day for Teaching English

There you go — spelling, grammar and the dictionary are all bunk. Backpackers can start to feel more confident in their ability to make a difference without any training, as they can't possibly do worse than what the education industry has mustered so far. People learn to speak English very well as long as they aren't in English class. Learning by doing is the new way to learn to speak English. Like riding a bike or playing the piano, **the only way to learn it is to do it**. This approach is where informal coaches excel.

Listening

Speaking is only part of conversation; **listening** is equally important. Listening is the dark horse in the brave new world of ESL experiential learning. It isn't spelling memorization or grammar study that provides access to learning English — it's **listening**. Understanding **what to listen for** is the most efficient entrée to learning/teaching Spoken English.

There are fixed basic patterns or principles that hold true in every conversation in every situation. Knowing these principles makes the most difference for learners, and the principles are portable. In a relatively short time (less than 30 hours), learners can take the principles for conversation with them and apply them to all their English encounters, without a teacher. Ultimately, speaking English is on students. All coaches can do is support learners as they practice their way to proficiency.

Remove Barriers

The biggest complaint I get from my ESL students is that native English speakers **talk too fast**. It's a fair comment. Conversation is fleeting. By the time a learner has processed what is being said, carefully formulated their grammatically correct response, suppressed their apprehension about their accent and are ready to jump into the river of conversation, their moment is already a mile and a half downstream. The **need for speed** isn't about native speakers — they are already too quick. It's for non-native speakers and teaching them how to **listen faster** (it's easy). When learners are skillful listeners, they participate more confidently in real-world

conversations. When the learners' listening improves, so does their ability to participate.

Truth be told, immersion is the fastest, most effective way to learn a new language. Barring that ideal situation, there is much a Backpacker can do to coach a student's real-world improvement. Unfortunately, as I might have mentioned, students sign up for English classes by the millions believing they will get a leg-up on speaking English. This never happens. Education focuses on reading and writing skills, but there is minimal understanding or practical results in speaking at the end of infinity with this type of lesson. Learners don't need more and more hypothetical claptrap nonsense; they need a **small amount of the right kind of information**, and they need **to practice** what they know until they can function in English on their own.

There are two aspects to listening, and the first one is all on the student.

It's casual listening, listening without understanding. My recommendation, and you can pass it on to your students, is that about 300 hours of **listening without understanding** is a minimum requirement for learning to speak any new language. It's a number I made up, but there it is. Learners need to experience the sounds, rhythm, and inflections of a new language before they ever attempt to interpret or generate them. This is how humans learn their first language so successfully — passively, with no dissection. It's best if your learners **start their listening regime today**. If necessary, help students find podcasts, YouTube videos, English music, sit coms or movies, and encourage them to have English talking always playing in the background in their homes and in their lives while they are making dinner or commuting... It is important that you counsel learners not to worry about meaning at all. At this point, struggling to understand what they are hearing is pointless, overwhelming and counterproductive. Exposure, especially if they listen to the **same passage** or movie or song over and over will reap tremendous benefits that we'll talk about soon.

Listening comes first, mimicking comes second, understanding comes next, and grammar comes last. Have your students get started with the passive practice of **listening to English** immediately. Trust the process.

Cuban Broadcaster Success Story

I read an article in the Canadian Newcomer Magazine about a refugee who arrived from Cuba with virtually no English skills. He was a broadcaster, and his dream was to be a broadcaster again. He watched Oprah tirelessly and repeated everything she said — without understanding what it was she was saying. After several months of persisting with this exercise, the understanding began to come. He was broadcasting in English accent-free within a year.

Jackie Chan learned to speak English by singing Willie Nelson songs. While Jackie Chan isn't accent free, he is self taught and super successful in English. If total immersion isn't an option, **listening without understanding** and then mimicking is the next best way to start learning to speak English.

The second part of listening is all on teachers. You can slash a student's learning time by teaching **what to listen for**. Herein lies the informal teacher's training about words, how they work and how they work together, so Backpackers can provide the insights learners need to speak English today — okay, this week. The secret is fast listening, and you can teach it. You can do it. I'll show you. It's in this book, and it's fun. Let's go.



What you Missed from Book One











Reading and Writing — Listening and Speaking


Before we stray too far from the big picture, we have to talk about context. You and your students must accept that reading and writing in English are not connected to listening or speaking in any meaningful way. /nowun kan redinglish an spekit/. It doesn't matter how much or how little English learners have studied in the past, they are all beginners when it comes to speaking as only reading and writing skills are taught in school. Get down with this because it is going to come up over and over again.

The Big Picture

In the context of teaching people to speak English, identify the complete process — the road map, pin-point with students where they are on their journey to fluency and which of the elements, if any, are also featured in their first language. It's the old harvest-what-is-the-same principle. There are six founding principles with no exceptions that define oral English communication. The first is about **Pronunciation** and the Sounds of English. It was covered thoroughly in Book One. This volume is on **Conversation** including the second, third and fourth principles for speaking English: *Words, Sentences and Linking*. Book Three on **Fluency** teaches the fifth and sixth principles: *Expressions* and *Non-Verbal* communication.

◆ The Roadmap to Fluency ◆

Pronunciation	Conversation			Fluency	
1 Sounds	2 Words	3 Sentences	4 Linking	5 Expressions	6 Non-Verbal
<p>English Phonetic Alphabet</p> <p>24 CONSONANTS 18 familiar bdfghj klmnp stvwyz</p> <p>6 new Sh, Ch, TH, Th, Ng, Zh</p> <p>16 VOWELS</p> 	<p>Syllables</p> <p>1 vowel sound per Syllable</p>  <p>Stress</p> <p>1 Syllable in a word is... longer louder higher ...than the rest</p> <p>baNana</p> <p>Schwa</p> <p>Tiny 'uh' sound in unstressed syllables</p> <p>buhNuh</p>	<p>Important Words</p> <p>CONTENT nouns verbs adjectives adverbs negatives</p> <p>Unimportant Words</p> <p>FUNCTION all others – grammar words</p>  <p>uh CUP uh COFFEE</p> <p>Pausing</p> <p>Pause every few Content Words</p> <p>Content Words + Pausing = Intelligibility</p>	<p>A Listening Tool</p> <p>CC bus stop bu_stop</p>  <p>CV turⁿoff</p> <p>I am I_yam</p> <p>VV Start words with consonants</p>  <p>Can I have a bit of egg? Ca ni hava bi da vegg?</p>	<p>English is Idiomatic</p>  <p>blue moon (rarely)</p>  <p>red eye (night flight)</p> <p>Learners Need to Ask</p> <p>What is the expression for that?</p>  <p>When pigs fly... (no chance)</p>	<p>Tone of Voice</p> <p>High-positive Low-negative</p> <p>Notes</p>  <p>what TIME is IT?</p> <p>Gestures</p> <p>Body Language is 80% of the Message</p> 

©Judy Thompson, 2009
◆ Changing the way the world learns English ◆
TLC THOMPSON LANGUAGE CENTER 

We are not studying **Sounds** now because sounds of General American English (GA), how to represent them with the English Phonetic Alphabet (EPA) and how they compare with any other language was covered thoroughly in *Book One of The Backpackers Guide series, Cracking the Code*.

Alright, alright! Enough information to get you by is this: there are 40 **sounds** in GA English, 24 consonant **sounds** and 16 vowel **sounds**. It is super helpful for learners if they are exposed to the English Phonetic Alphabet (EPA) so they can read pronunciation when necessary. While learners should be familiar with English sounds and ideally be able to create them, **English is not a sound-based language**, which means accurately producing individual sounds isn't particularly critical. Let's look at French speakers for example – if French speakers learning English never pronounce TH */zu wezer is sunny/* they just sound sexy and no meaning is lost. */Teacher, you me vashroom/* **Substitution of individual sounds doesn't affect intelligibility**. Keep this in mind before you spend excessive amounts of time on linguistics and other information that doesn't make a difference.

If you read Book One, AWESOME! The Thompson Vowel Chart is familiar. If you haven't, you need to know vowel sounds are both villains and heroes in pronunciation.

- There are 16 vowel **sounds** in English, which is wicked (long and short a, e, i, o and u are 10 of them, three orphans and three R vowels).
- There is no relationship between letters a, e, i, o and u and the sounds they represent, which is evil.
- There are 16 colors that each feature one of the 16 vowel sounds in their names, which is a happy accident.
- Colors are the touchstone for pronunciation, which saves the day — and they all live happily ever after. For example: **rain, day, great, eight, they...** are **Gray** words independent of spelling, because their main vowel *sound* is **long a**, as in the color name **Gray**. The colors in the *Thompson Vowel Chart* are a ray of hope in the long, dark tunnel of pronunciation and crazy English spelling.





The First Principle: Every word in English is a color. No exceptions. The Thompson Vowel Chart is an idiot-proof pronunciation device that captures the pronunciation of every English word, regardless of spelling.

We are finished talking about sounds, but we will continue to use the Thompson Vowel Chart extensively. It holds the keys to pronunciation, connected speech (conversation) and the whacky world of expressions — but I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's dial it back.

THOMPSON VOWEL CHART			
color word	color	EPA	double example
gray		/Ay/	rainy day
black		/a/	black cat
green		/Ey/	green tree
red		/e/	red head
white		/Iy/	white knight
pink		/I/	pink ring
gold		/ow/	old goat
olive		/o/	hot coffee
blue		/Uw/	blue shoe
mustard		/u/	honey mustard
wood		/^/	good wood
turquoise		/oy/	noisy toy
brown		/Aw/	brown cow
purple		/Er/	purple girl
charcoal		/Ar/	dark charcoal
orange		/Or/	orange door

Backstory on Words

Principles 2, 3 and 4 on the *Road Map to Fluency* are what you are learning to teach now. The **Need for Speed** is about **words** and how to say them, how they work in **sentences**, and how they **link** together in weirdly predictable places. When we talk about Principles, we are talking about the framework of conversation that is **always true** — from “Mama, ta ta”, “Dada, wa wa”, to the Speech from the Throne, whether in Canada, the USA, Australia, Great Britain or South Africa, English conversations work because they follow the same three iron-clad Principles.

♦ The Roadmap to Fluency ♦				
Pronunciation	Conversation			Fluency
	2 Words	3 Sentences	4 Linking	
	<p>Syllables 1 vowel sound per Syllable</p>  <p>Stress 1 Syllable in a word is... longer louder higher ... than the rest baNAna</p> <p>Schwa Tiny 'uh' sound in unstressed syllables buhNAuh</p>	<p>Important Words CONTENT nouns verbs adjectives adverbs negatives</p> <p>Unimportant Words FUNCTION all others – grammar words</p>  <p>uh CUP uh COffee</p> <p>Pausing Pause every few Content Words Content Words + Pausing = Intelligibility</p>	<p>A Listening Tool CC bus stop bu_stop </p> <p>CV turⁿoff off</p> <p>VV I am I_yam Start words with consonants </p> <p>Can I have a bit of egg? Ca ni hava bi da vegg?</p>	

Judy Thompson

♦ The Backpacker's Guide to Teaching English ♦

TLC THOMPSON LANGUAGE CENTER

Let me remind you why is it important to know how conversation works. Teaching **how words work** in conversation fosters accelerated listening. **Fast listening** is the goal. Principles 2, 3 and 4 are the learner's access to fast listening and eventually, confident speaking.

In a few short, fascinating lessons, your students will be able to jump into the flow of conversation and express themselves on topics of interest to them. The secret to listening faster is **knowing what to listen for**. The short answer is **Important Words**, but it is too much of a leap to get there from here. We have to lay some groundwork first.

Words

As a newbie, you need to know that **words** and **how they work** aren't what you think.

In the context of **words**, the Thompson Vowel Chart has **special powers**. Although vowels are innately tricky, by associating them with the colors that feature those vowel sounds in their names, there suddenly is a bridge for accurately pronouncing English words (over a million so far) regardless of spelling. The Thompson Vowel Chart capitalizes on the fundamental, unchanging, **mechanics** of sounds, syllables and words that Joe Native Speaker and most English teachers are blissfully unaware of. What's great about **mechanics**, as in **patterns**, is that there are no exceptions. The underpinnings of language are so simple and so fundamental that all infants figure out first language patterns without instruction. Unfortunately, the moment baby humans figure language out, *how they did it* slips below their level of awareness. It is beyond helpful to bring these mechanics back to the surface when teaching English as a Second or Learned Language.

The inner-workings of word pronunciation that you forgot before your second birthday:

- **Vowel sounds dictate syllables.** There is one and only one vowel sound in any syllable.
- There is one and only **one most important** or **main syllable** in every word.

How are these important for our cause, which is to teach speaking?

- The most important or main syllable **dictates** the **pronunciation**, **meaning** and **color** of every word.
- Said the other way, the **color of a word holds its pronunciation** and **meaning**.

FYI Sidebar:

The problem with words, as you have probably noticed, is spelling. Neither natives nor nonnatives can read unfamiliar words and know with any assurance how to pronounce them. Although I usually make a point of avoiding jargon, I'm making an exception here with **homonyms**. *Homonym* is

a typically confusing word because it refers to three different word groups. Homonyms can be words with different spellings and the same pronunciation (for example, **to**, **too** and **two**). Homonyms can also be words that are spelled the same but with different pronunciations and meanings like **wind** (noun, air moving quickly; verb, to coil as a rope). If that wasn't bad enough, homonyms can also be words with identical spellings and pronunciations and mean completely different things like **bear** (noun, large furry woodland animal; verb, to carry or produce, as in *apple trees bear fruit in the autumn*). I broke my own no-jargon rule because **homonyms** so beautifully showcase that English spelling doesn't tell what words mean or how they are pronounced.

Context determines meaning and **color determines pronunciation**.

Figuring out how words are pronounced in spite of their crazy English spelling is what we are going to sort out once and for all right now.

Simple Pronunciation System

For a quick verification of the mechanics listed above, look at this family of multi-syllable words. Clap your hands or tap your desk as you say the words to help you count the syllables. (If you just read without clapping, I will find out!)

NAtion, cre**A**tion, situ**A**tion, congratu**LA**tions, syllabi**CA**tion, pronunci**A**tion...

These are all **Gray** words. No matter how many syllables are in a word, there is **one and only one most important syllable**. The color of the main syllable dictates the color of the word. Conversely, the color of the word tells its pronunciation as in main syllable. Word pronunciation is accessible to everyone for the first time through color.

Check it out. These are all **Pink** words: **is**, **him**, **with**, **sister**, **women**, **busy**, **build**, **pretty**, **condition**, **instrument**, **original**... Oh, ya! Crazy! What did I tell you?

Spelling is not connected to pronunciation. English users can't rely on their eyes for pronunciation. There is no help there. They have to use their ears. The saving grace in pronouncing crazy English is that pronunciation can be linked inextricably to the color of the main vowel sound.

Listening Exercise for Syllables and Colors: Let's demonstrate the exercise with **Judy is Blue**

The fastest, easiest, most engaging way for learners to grasp the whole color-of-the-important syllable thing is a fun game called **What Color is Your Name?** How much I share before the game depends on the level of the student. For **novices**, after we have studied the chart and learned the colors and their sounds (sometimes for several sessions), we learn about syllables. I clap my hands or slap my desk while I count syllables to demonstrate a few words, but we don't dwell on this. In my experience, identifying the number of beats (syllables) is a universal human skill, but **identifying the most important syllable isn't**.

Learners need visual support to **see** the stressed syllable. I hook a large, floppy rubber band between my thumbs. (You bought some, didn't you? Put the book down. Go and get an elastic band.) As I say my name, I pull my hands wide apart on the first syllable. **JUuuu** dy really exaggerating the **JU**.

My name has two syllables. The first syllable is Blue and the second one is Green, but my name isn't **JU DY** or **juDY**. Those just sound weird. It's **JU** dy and it's a **Blue** word.

For **Advanced** students, I tell them my name is **Blue** and throw down a copy of the **Thompson Vowel Chart**, explaining their name is one of the colors on the chart. They figure it out.

Everyone else is somewhere in between. The rubber band demonstration never hurts, so perform it every time. It's fun. Be sure you have enough big floppy rubber bands in your tool kit to go around! Have extras, because boys of all ages will still shoot theirs across the room, break and lose them.

The Secret to Intelligibility in English is Stress

I should probably have printed that in bigger letters.

The Secret to Intelligibility in English is Stress

That's better.



No! Not this kind of stress.

Word Stress

Word stress is specific voice qualities applied to specific syllables. English is a **stressed-based language** in that the *meaning* in English is **not** a function of perfect grammar or even native-like sound production but of word stress. This is huge, so I'll say it again. (Don't take it personally; it's just that I've had a lot of children.) **Word stress is the cornerstone of intelligibility in English.** If word stress is accurate, the message is clear to native speakers in spite of accent, grammar or any pronunciation mistakes the speaker might make. Conversely, if word stress is wrong or missing, native speakers can't understand and can't guess what is being said.

My guru, Kathryn Brillinger, used **banana** when she taught this to me, and it works so perfectly I use it too. How many syllables in banana? ___ That's right. And the last two syllables **are spelled** the same but **don't sound** the same at all. Listen carefully: /ba **NA** na/. The second syllable in banana is **higher, longer** and **louder** than the other two syllables. It's **stressed**.

If native speakers hear /**BA** na na/, /ba na **NA**/ or /**BA NA NA**/ they have no idea what was said.

Sometimes, but not often, when word stress is moved, the same collection of letters takes on a completely different meaning: **CON**tent and con**TENT**, **RE**cord and re**CORD**, **RE**bel, re**BEL**...

Accurate word stress is the home of meaning in English. Did I say that already? Sorry, it is just so important!

Mara's Story The Impact of Word Stress in Real Life

If I described Mara in one word, it would be classy or elegant. She had emigrated from Central America with her husband and four small children thirteen years before I became her teacher. As is often the case for women, she was extremely isolated in her new country. Her children learned English in school and her husband learned it at work, but she spoke no English and had no friends. Fortunately, Mara came to understand that domestic violence is not tolerated in Canada. She left her husband and started a new life for herself and her children, and her new life included English classes.

One morning in class, her kind, effervescent personality was noticeably subdued. We all wondered what was wrong. She shared her story. It was her son's sixteenth birthday, and she took her family out for a meal to celebrate. She took them for breakfast. When it was her turn to order, she told the server she wanted "Coffee an pekundaneesh". The server asked her to repeat her order. Beginning to feel uncomfortable, Maria repeated, "Coffee an pekundaneesh". The server responded, "Why don't you just speak English?", turned and walked away. Mara was mortified, and the celebration was ruined.

Sweet Mara announced to the class she would never to go to a restaurant again. As she retreated to her seat, quietly nursing her shame, class resumed. That day, we just so happened to be learning about **Word Stress**. The students learned there is one, and only one, stressed syllable in any word. They learned that the **stressed syllables are higher, longer and louder than other syllables**, and if the word stress is missing or in the wrong place, native speakers cannot understand what is being said. Mara must have been listening because she stood and blurted out, "**PE**can **DA**nish"!

It gets better. This is the kind of woman she was. The next morning, Mara glided into the classroom, her usual cheerful demeanour restored. With her hand on one hip and her finger wagging, Maria filled us in. "Yesta day, I go back to dat restran. I see dat lady an I say to she — I wanna **PE**can **DA**nish! An she bring me."

What I Learned From Mara

In spite of imperfect grammar and significant sound production issues, Mara was a hair's breadth away from perfect intelligibility and didn't know it. She had been trying to pronounce English as it was written because her first language (Spanish) works that way. Spanish is logical. English is not. Millions of learners make this honest mistake.

What is the same about Spanish and English is that they use a similar range of sounds, but in a slightly different way. This was something from her first language Mara quickly began to appreciate, adapt and use to her advantage. Not an ESL teacher in 100,000 can teach that, but soon you'll be able to because of what I learned from Mara.

The Second Principle: English is a stress-based language. There is one and only one most important syllable in any word. That syllable is higher, longer and louder than all the other syllables. The stressed syllable holds the meaning, pronunciation and intelligibility of the words.

Word Stress is Numero Uno

If there is very little time to spend with a learner, as little as 20 minutes, teach them word stress because it makes **the biggest difference** in their ability to make themselves understood for the rest of their lives.

Back in the day, when I had morning and afternoon classes of Adult ESL students five days a week for three hours at a time, I used to teach all kinds of details that didn't make a difference about minor stress, unstressed syllables, schwa, blah, blah, blah. I was trained to teach things I'd learned **about** speaking English and believed all those details would make a difference for students. They didn't. I bored them senseless. More and more and more information works against learners' ability to converse. **Small bits of the right kinds of information** make a dramatic difference. Have I mentioned this before? Sorry, I'm just so excited about it.

Pronunciation for Rank Beginners — Brazilian Street Children

If you aren't clear about the power of patterns, this story is going to help. Patterns are always true — no exceptions, so beginning learners benefit as much as advanced learners because the system **works exactly the same for all material**. That's what **always true** means!

In 2012, I taught business executive in the Hyatt Regency in Sao Paulo, Brazil. On two magical Saturday mornings, I had the opportunity to volunteer and teach children in a very special school. In this school for middle and upper-class children, the rich children obtained permission from their principal to educate and feed poor children in the school building on weekends. Every Saturday morning, while the principal stood watch and mothers prepared food, hundreds of 6 to 10-year-old street children showed up, clean and in their best togs, to learn math, art, gym and English from 12 to 15-year-old day-school students, before enjoying a hearty lunch provided by rich mothers. Truth be told, the food was the biggest draw. Never mind. The two weekends before I left Brazil, 15-year-old Camilla graciously let me teach her English class.

My little charges had never heard English spoken, and I didn't speak a word of Portuguese. As I walked up to the front of the room, I seriously wondered what I would say when I turned to face them. With less than four steps to go, I started singing the Alphabet Song, — ABCD, EFG ... 🎵 The children started to sing with me. I was home free! They didn't know nothing — they knew their ABCs, and that was enough. The color chart works with everything, and letters are things.

I had a set of 16 colored cardboard flashcards with me, and I printed the alphabet on the board. "This color is **Gray**." I held the card up to show them. "**A is Gray**," I said pointing to the symbol on the board. A dozen exquisite little faces stared intently at me from their seats.

"What color is this?" I held up a **Green** card. "Green". Someone knew.

"**B is Green, C is Green**. What color is **D**?" I asked. "Green" soft voices chimed.

"Good. **Red, F is Red**. What color is **G**?"... "Green" they shouted!

It was one of the most beautiful sounds I had ever heard.

The Colors of the Alphabet

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee

Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj

Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo

Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt

Uu Vv Ww Xx

Yy Zz

TLC THOMPSON
LANGUAGE CENTER
Changing the way the world learns English

All the letters of the alphabet use only seven of the sixteen colors, but it was a great start. Mostly, the students learned that words are grouped by colors according to their sounds. The next week, I brought colored pencils. We filled in the nine missing colors to complete the color chart, and together we created Thompson Vowel Charts for each of them to keep.

Then Camilla handed out the big, floppy, rubber bands I brought for each of her students. We played **The Game**. "My name is **JU**dy and **Ju**dy is Blue," I demonstrated. **What Color is Your Name?**

One by one, we went around the room, and every child accurately determined the color of their name. **Gleeson** figured out he was Green, **Patrick** knew he was Black, **Andre** was Red, and when **Victoria** let us know she was Orange, I knew I would never teach the details about syllables ever again. For years, I had been over-teaching a system that was as natural to learners as breathing. There is word stress in Portuguese.

Retrieving Pronunciation

Like the Dewey Decimal system in a library, patient files in a doctor's office or names in a phone book, the 16 color vowels live in learners' brains like a **filing system**. Words they encounter get stored in one of sixteen color-folders for easy retrieval when the time comes to pronounce them. The brain loves fool-proof systems. Provide the pronunciation destinations (color folders), and the brain will do the rest.

Word stress is the access to intelligibility.

Colors are the access to generating and retrieving pronunciation.



Harvest “What is the Same”

Book One included a handy tool for determining the sounds that are the same in English and any another language.

In **Book Two**, we have graduated to **words**, and all we have to consider is if the learner’s first language is **stress-based** or **not**. I’ll save you the trouble. European languages (including Russian and all Central and South American languages) use word stress for meaning. Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern.... do not.

Did you ever notice how you can understand Europeans, Russians and South Americans when they speak English? Yes, they have accents, everyone has an accent. First language programming runs in the background but **doesn’t automatically impede intelligibility**. European languages have word stress. While people from these language backgrounds talk, you may spend a few seconds registering, “Oh, he’s from Italy, or she’s from Germany or Poland or France or Sweden,” but you still know what they are saying. These learners have accents (which are charming) and their English is intelligible.

If a language isn’t stress-based, **it’s sound-based**. In sound-based languages, each and every symbol represents one and only one sound. Each sound, each syllable and each word are equally important. This foundation gives a sewing machine quality to Arabic, Chinese, East Indian, Korean, Vietnamese... to English speakers’ ears. Students from these language groups are difficult for English speakers to understand. In sound-based languages, if one sound is missing or off, meaning is lost.

Learning Sound-Based the Hard Way

When I was teaching in Korea being a good little Canadian ambassador, I politely thanked everyone for everything /kum sa me da/, /kum sa me da/, /kum sa me da/.... (four syllables). No one had any idea what I was saying. One of my students took pity on me and asked, “What are you trying to say?” “Thank you,” I told him. Oh! He corrected, /kum sa ha me da/ (five syllables). I was missing one little /ha/, and no one knew what I was saying and couldn’t guess. There is **zero flexibility** in individual sound production. Each and every symbol represents one and only one sound. Each symbol and each syllable are equally important, hence **sound-based** language. Not like English patterns at all.

Accent versus Intelligibility

You can see how the sound-based orientation contributes to the self-conscious way these learners avoid speaking English, believing any tiny sound mistake or omission and they are unsure of exactly what they've said. Speakers from sound-based languages **believe they must be perfect**. It's potentially so embarrassing for the speaker that they'd rather not speak at all. It's tragic misinformation. You can be the one to teach these learners that native speakers don't pay attention to individual sounds. **Native speakers rely on word stress** (plus context and body language). **Lack of word stress** makes speakers from sound-based languages unintelligible. Non-native speakers don't have to be perfect, they just have to be intelligible.

Call Centers

Take India, for example, I can't tell you how many students I've had from India who had clearly studied English for years, fabulous sound production, grammar and spelling skills that were better than mine, yet they were unintelligible. **No word stress!** What I wouldn't do to distribute a 10-minute video to call center operators in India. **Word Stress is the single most important feature of speaking English, and if it isn't there, there is no intelligibility.** It's on you to determine if your students have word stress. You may need to modify it if they have it or install it if they don't. I'll say it again. Chinese, Arabs, Korean, Vietnamese, Pakistani, East Indians... don't have it.

Installing a New Software

What's amazing is that exposure doesn't afford language students accent-free second language acquisition because new languages are heard through **the filter** of their first language. **Listening is subjective.** If Saudi, Thai, Sri Lankan, Mandarin, Hindi... speakers could hear word stress, they could emulate it. But they can't. How do you make learners from sound-based languages hear word stress? You can't. Well, not at first. Listening is off the table because of the filter thing. You can only make students see word stress. That is why the rubber bands are so important. When learners **see you move your hands apart** on stressed syllables they subsequently **develop an ear** for the phenomenon, and then they can copy it. When learners get word stress, it's like flipping a switch or upgrading from black and white to color. Their learning accelerates exponentially. You have insisted they get lots of exposure to real-world English — right?

Magic Wand

Discerning, installing and prioritizing word stress are what sets Backpackers apart. Word stress is a magic wand, but it takes practice before students master it. When your students are with you, speaking slowly and mindfully, their word stress will be evident. When they step out the door or are excited and talking quickly, it disappears. That's okay. The important thing is, out in the real world when someone doesn't understand what they are saying, they can fix it. It's word stress. **Self correcting is an earmark of fluency.** Their ability to hear themselves and fix word stress on the fly will get stronger and stronger until intelligibility is second nature. If you have only a short amount of time with a learner from a sound-based language, **make sure you teach them word stress.**

Students are the Greatest Teachers

Back to the bu\$ine\$\$ people in Brazil. Business people are sharp students with loads of money and no time. As huge players on the world economic stage, Brazilian business people are expected to lead meetings around the world with only their rusty high-school English. They are certain their English isn't good enough. They are wrong. If someone asks you to help them with their English, they speak English already and don't know it. It's the Wizard of Oz effect, in that they only think they can't, which is an easy problem to solve. It was teaching executives when I learned how to quickly and accurately discern exactly what is the same about Portuguese and English in order to serve my clients better and faster.

It changed the course of my life. I had been blindly vomiting the information I'd been taught at TESL school at my students without acknowledging what language parts they already had in place. As I looked back on my teaching career, I felt a little bit sick as I noticed for the first time that **none of my students were mute.** I taught each and every one of them as if they made no sounds at all. It was humbling. I was an invalidating, unprofessional, infinitely boring teacher.

In truth, my students had significant parts of their first language they could use for speaking English **regardless of their level of experience!** It was a game changer. I had to stop sharing what I thought I knew about English and identify what they needed to know instead. As Backpackers, you are spared all of this and presented here with only the tools that cut to the chase. Lucky you!

Inching Closer to Teaching Fast Listening

It's all fine and dandy to figure out word stress/pronunciation with a resource like a native speaker or a good coach at hand. How do learners figure out word stress independently? Let's keep the end goal in sight. We are training learners to use English successfully in the real world on their own.

1 How to Figure out Pronunciation without a Teacher

I believe we have finally nailed the importance of word stress and that one main syllable in every word is stressed — got it. How do you tell which syllable it is? It's only useful to students if they can figure it out on their own. What is the pattern?

I'm just making sure I've talked enough about patterns and the human brain. ***"Humans are pattern-seeking, meaning-making machines"***. Rita Baker
— Brain Power We are designed to notice patterns, then store and repeat ones that work for us. Word stress patterns fall into this category. Here are a few guidelines for pronouncing huge families of words and one **hot tip** for the rest.

Two syllables

- Nouns: Stress is usually (80%) on the **first syllable**: TAble, PENcil, STUdent...
- Verbs: Stress is usually (60%) on the **second syllable**: enJOY, beLIEVE, deLAY...

Three syllables

The stress is usually on the first or second syllable. Very rarely is the stressed syllable the final syllable in a three-syllable word engiNEER, kangaroo, jambaREE...

Multi-syllables

There are some patterns for pronouncing words of three, four, five, six syllables and more. Suffixes (small groups of letters added onto the end of words to slightly change their meaning or function) can be really useful in helping find stressed syllables. We looked at one of these suffix families already. Can you see the pattern?

Nation, **crea**tion, **conven**tion, **perc**ussion, **congratu**lations, **com**passion, **educa**tion...

Yes, the syllable before /shun/ regardless of spelling is always the most important.

What is the pattern in these word families?

- **magnetic**, **athletic**, **realistic**, **poetic**, **idealistic**...
(same as with /shun/, it's the syllable before /tic/)
- **phy**/si/cal, a/na/**ly**/ti/cal, **prac**/ti/cal, **ra**/di/cal, me/ta/**phy**/si/cal, i/de/o/**llo**/gi/cal...
(the syllable before /ical/ or two syllables from the end)
- **stability**, **equality**, **responsibility**, **curiosity**, **compatibility**, **personality**...
(the syllable before /ity/ or two syllables before the end)

Very cool. It's right in front of our faces, and we didn't know it was there. Our brains are hardwired to find and remember patterns like these that help us figure out how to pronounce unfamiliar words: **regulate**, **eradicate**, **enunciate**, **repudiate**. Once learners find which syllable is stressed, they figure out the color, flip it into the color file, and for all of time can retrieve the pronunciation of that word no matter how long it is or how infrequently they've heard it. Brains love this stuff. Giving your students the manual for their own computing device goes a long way to fostering their pronunciation independence and success.

The patterns above are awesome, but the pronunciation of most English words isn't addressed in any of those guidelines. The promise in the intro was that you'd teach learners how to pronounce words without a teacher. How do you do that? It's easier than you think.

Do it Wrong

The skill of employing word stress on any given syllable comes to the rescue here. Try to say the word out loud, putting the stress initially on the first syllable, next onto the second syllable, until all syllables have been featured. Only one of them will **sound right**. It's what native speakers do in their head when they encounter challenging words, and it works really well. Your students have been casually listening to English, I trust. Well, time spent on casual listening pays big dividends now. Learners are astounded at how accurately they can **recognize correct pronunciation** when they hear it. Pronunciation is multiple choice. It's **FA ci na ting**, **fa CI na ting**, **fa ci NA ting** or **fa ci na TING**? Which one? Yup, the first one.

Mistakes are Going to Happen, But You Aren't Going to Die!

Everyone makes pronunciation mistakes, even me. I happened to be in Alabama in the spring when the songbirds were migrating north. A group of bird watchers was very excited to point out a Prothonotary Warbler to me. Do you think I could remember the name of that bird? I couldn't. I looked it up on Google and found the spelling. The 'notary' part of the word jumped out for me because I thought lawyer was a funny description of a bird. By attaching the new information to information I already knew, I was able to remember the name of the bird, but it betrayed me in the pronunciation. I pronounced it **/pro tho no ta ry/**. I was wrong. The next day, the migration continued, and when the pretty yellow warbler was spotted, I was quickly corrected **/pro tho no ta ry/**. We all make mistakes; just take the lesson.



Here he is, warbling. He doesn't even look like a lawyer.

English is a stress-based language. Got it. So what?

So everything!

I have alluded to the fact that individual sounds are not particularly important in English. English is not a sound-based language, in that native English speakers do not rely on perfect pronunciation of each individual sound for meaning. Far from it. In fact, native speakers have unlimited tolerance for mispronounced and/or missing individual sounds. Case in point, no native speaker would be confused about the weather, day or time of the meeting in these examples.

De weader iz sunny an hot.
 Zu weazer iz colt an rain.
 Zee meedin Venzday 10:00.
 Meedin Toozdee 8.

This is great news for learners crippled by their concerns about their accents — no one cares.

If word stress is in place, even the most basic student can make themselves understood. "Teacher, you me VASHroom" worked perfectly when everything else was wrong.

Trick question: How are Accent and Intelligibility related?

A: They aren't.

Everyone has an accent. If native speakers can't understand, the learner has an intelligibility issue that must be addressed. When their word stress lessons are complete, they will still have an accent! But people will stop saying "What?" to them all the time.

Only 2000 Words

We have talked about how different writing is from speaking, and here is another big difference. There are over a million words in English, but most of them are used for reading and writing. That's right, spoken vocabulary is much, much smaller than written vocabulary. Native speakers use only about 2,000 words most of the time. Learners probably have a working vocabulary of several hundred already. It's not that big a step to reach 1,500 or 2,000 words.

FYI

To help learners, we created ***How Do You Say?*** It's a pronunciation, expression and spelling resource for the 2,000 most common words in English. Learners can look up the **spelling** of words they **hear**.

I truly believe ***How Do You Say?*** is the greatest ESL book ever written. It's the world's first **Sound Dictionary** that not only categorizes the 2,000 most common words in English by color for **pronunciation**, it also includes thousands of **expressions**! When learners hear ordinary words used in unusual ways (red eye, blue moon, white collar), those are **expression alerts**! Students can find the meaning of thousands of common expressions in ***How Do You Say?*** But I'm getting ahead of myself again.

The Main Event

2 Listening Faster

Overview:

- The single most important element in **meaning** is **Context**.
- The single most important element in **speaking** is **Word Stress**.
- The single most important element in **listening** is **Sentence Stress**.

What is Sentence Stress?

Sentence stress is the mirror image of word stress in a slightly bigger arena. In words, some **syllables** are important and some are not; in sentences, some **words** are important and some are not. I'll show you what I mean:

Would you care for a cup of **coffee**?

Can I interest you in some **coffee**?

Jawanna gedda cuppa **coffee**?

Havya hajer **coffee**?

Coffee?

All mean exactly the same thing.

There is only one important word in each of those sentences. It's clear and stressed — **CO**ffee. Thanks to the context that we already talked about and word stress, those sentences all make perfect sense and ask exactly the same question.

The coffee example is an over simplification. It's still true, but I don't want the coffee example having you believe there is only one most important word in every sentence. Much like there are important and unimportant syllables in words, important and unimportant words are interspersed in sentences. All words are not equally important in English. **Important words carry the day.**

I'll tell you a little story about my student Pablo, then flesh out the details about sentence stress.

You Don't Need Perfect Grammar to Speak English

— Pablo's Story

Pablo was a bright, well educated, friendly, nineteen-year-old student fresh off the boat from Columbia. As a born gentleman, he was a tremendous asset to my Intermediate Adult ESL class. One day, he came to class more than an hour late, which was unusual. When he found his seat, he sat down, stood up, sat down, then stood up again, which was even more unusual.

Pablo, do you have something to tell the class? He did.

Using important words and animated gestures, Pablo shared his story.

We learned he lived on the outskirts of town near the industrial section. He was waiting for his bus that morning at the usual time. The only other person at his stop was an elderly woman. Without warning, she made a deep coughing sound, grabbed at her chest and fell to the ground. Pablo recreated the scenario perfectly. The look of panic and horror on his face told us a lot about his experience. He had no idea how to help this woman, and he feared she was going to die because he didn't speak English.

Pablo could see a security guard in the lobby of a nearby factory. He mimed running to the building, flattening himself against the plate glass window and pounding his arms against it. The guard opened the door a crack. (Pablo demonstrated by holding his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.) I think the security guard thought the kid was crazy — I would have. He asked Pablo what he wanted. Pablo thumped his chest with his hand, pointed to the bus stop and uttered, **Woman, heart, bus!** The security guard understood immediately and called 911. (Pablo punched his finger three times into the palm of his hand as if it held a cell phone.)

I asked my student, How long did it take the ambulance to get there?

Five minutes, he answered holding up his right hand displaying five fingers.

How is the woman?

He cupped his left hand over his nose and mouth mimicking an oxygen mask and drew a few deep breaths. *Fine*, he nodded and smiled.

Everyone cheered, but I wasn't quite finished. *How much grammar did you use?* He thought about it for a minute, then made a circle with the tip of his thumb and forefinger — zero.

Pablo quit school.

Several months later, he came back to the class for a visit. *Where did you go? We wondered.* He replied **fluently**, *"I thought I needed grammar for people to understand me, but I don't. I got a job."*

He never would have learned to speak English as well in ESL class, even in my English class, lol. Listening first; practice next, no matter how rudimentary; grammar (if ever); fluency last.

What I Learned From Pablo

I learned two things from Pablo. Between context, body language and the odd properly stressed important word, learners can make themselves understood with no English classes at all. And with one tiny piece of information, in his case *sentence stress* a learner can be set free to use whatever English they already know to engage in the real world. **Outside the classroom is where learners become better at speaking English.** Our job is to get them out there as quickly and functionally as possible.

It became my life quest to find those transformational pieces. I wanted to be a teacher who found and delivered the tiny pieces of information that each of my students needed to dramatically curtail the amount of time they spend in class. I got into the habit of asking my foreign-trained professional students at Sheridan College what specific piece of information made the most difference for them during our *Speaking Canadian English* course. All of them could pinpoint one moment, one trigger, where everything they'd studied in English fell into place. My whole world changed. How do I find that trigger for each of my students to get them out in the world speaking English? The answer is pretty much what you are reading now.

The Third Principle: *Important words carry the day.* Context, body language and important words properly stressed provide enough information for successful rudimentary conversations. Learners need to know they can make themselves understood now.

Patterns Strike Again

Let's step back for a minute and revisit context. Since it's unthinkable for learners to accept that most words in spoken English are insignificant, it's an opportune time to share something amazing I learned about patterns in English from my esteemed colleague, Peggy Tharpe, the American accent coach from Monterey, California. Peggy taught me that the very essence of English is the waves of important and unimportant at every level of production.

Letters

In spelling, some letters are important, and some are not. What is the real contribution (besides spelling convention) of the **w** or the **k** in words like **w**rite, **k**nee and **k**now? They are comparatively unimportant. If you take them away, you are left with rite, nee, and no, which are the important letters that retain the essences of the words. Other languages don't do this. Also, every letter in English is silent sometimes.

plumber, scissors, Wednesday, raffle, sign, rhino...calm, autumn...

Syllables

In pronunciation, some syllables are important, and some are not.

/PA PA YA/ is not a recognizable word to a native speaker. /PA pa ya/ and /pa pa YA/ aren't English either. Only when higher, louder, longer are applied to one specific syllable (in this case, the second one), does /pa PA ya/ become an intelligible word.

Words

We already experienced important and unimportant words in the *coffee sentences* previously. Again, this phenomenon is not confined to that one sentence. This feature is part of every sentence, and it's the feature that is going to transform your students' listening. No matter how long or sophisticated the sentences, the pattern holds: **Some words are important and carry meaning; the rest do not.**

And So On

Are you starting to see the pattern? Like waves rippling out from a pebble in a pond, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, books, courses... all radiate the up and down pattern of important and unimportant in English. It's a nice little bedrock image for learners, especially those from sound-based languages that don't behave like this at all. Thank you, Peggy Tharpe!

Circling Back to the Main Event

We have arrived at **listening faster**. Maybe you can see how **important words** impact listening? If not yet, I'll spell it out for you.

It takes a native speaker exactly the same amount of time to say each of the six sentences below. Regardless of the number of words in each sentence, there are only **three important words** in each of them. The three important words are stressed/pronounced clearly, and the rest are reduced to almost nothing. Go ahead. Read them out loud and time yourself. If you don't have a stop watch, just clap on the bolded words. It will knock your socks off.

Mice eat cheese.

The **mice eat cheese.**

The **mice eat** the **cheese.**

The **mice** will **eat** the **cheese.**

The **mice** have **eaten** the **cheese.**

The **mice** will have **eaten** the **cheese.**

Students have been struggling to hear every single element uttered by native speakers and suffering unspeakably because they can't discern every little word. They don't hear half the words because native speakers don't pronounce them! Native speakers don't pronounce them because they **aren't important**. Said another way, **learners only have to listen to half of what they are trying to hear now**.

Native speakers aren't talking as fast as you might think. What they are really doing is reducing intermittent grammar words to tiny grunts.

Time to Sue Education

It's ironic/tragic that students study grammar almost exclusively in ESL school, yet it's so insignificant in conversation that native speakers don't bother to pronounce it! For all the millions of dollars and hours wasted on studying grammar, I have to get some Kleenex and take a little moment to compose myself. Yes, grammar is important in writing — extremely important in writing (and English grammar is far more important than Latin grammar, lol), but writing and speaking are unconnected, and this book is all about speaking. Back to work.

How do You Tell Which Words Are Important?

If you are the listener, important words are the only words you'll clearly hear. They are higher, longer and louder than unimportant words. Also, native speakers only move their bodies in sync with important words. You **can see which words are important** if you can see the speaker.

If you are the **speaker**, there are groups of words are always stressed — no exceptions. Yup, patterns. Imagine that.

I'm a little afraid to share the minutiae with you of which words to stress in case you bog your students down with silly details, but you can find the list on the *Road Map* anyway, so I might as well. It is not necessary to drill student on this list! I'm just going to have to hand it over and trust you to use your discretion. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and negatives are the bulk of it. That's easy enough.

There is a tiny bit more to it:

- Any word can be stressed, if necessary, for focus. What would normally be pronounced "it's on the **desk**" could be pronounced "it's **on** the desk", if a precise location is in question.
- Although prepositions are usually not stressed, there is an over-riding rule that there must be stress on two-syllable words so **above** and **beside** are stressed a little, even though they are only prepositions.

That's it. Important words are stressed, and the rest are not.

Rule of Thumb

If your students have studied English in the past, they may finally be able to use a tiny morsel of the drivel they have been exposed to. Words that take capitals in **titles** are words that are stressed in sentences. Oh yes, we secretly knew some words are important and some are not.

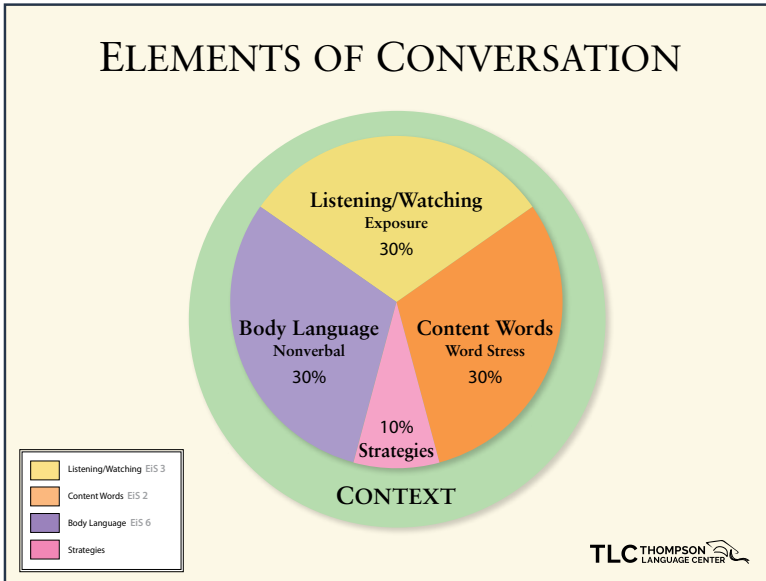
It's unnecessary and unlikely that non-native speakers totally master stressed and unstressed words, and it doesn't matter. The difference in their **listening speed** and **confidence** from just knowing about it is immeasurable.

Show Don't Tell

You've heard me downplay grammar ruthlessly and peddle other elements of successful (not perfect) conversation. I have made this pie graph showing the elements of successful conversation and their relative weight of importance.

Pausing

Regardless of punctuation, every two to four important words uttered, native English speakers stop talking. If learners don't do this, they won't be understood.



Context

It's a circle within a circle. **Context**, in green, **gives meaning to all conversations.**

Basic communication engages Body Language, Listening Skills, Important Words, and Strategies. It is **context** not grammar that makes dialogue work. **Learners should know**, in real life, every situation and every conversation happen inside of **context** that constantly and powerfully supports what they want to convey. **Context and a few choice words pronounced with accurate word stress is all budding speakers need to have to get into the game of conversation.** That said, most would like a little more support. The ballpark is 20 to 30 hours of instruction. A speaking course that takes longer than 30 hours is delivering far too much superfluous information. A speaking course with a money-back guarantee that takes 5 to 10 hours to complete is the mark of a really fantastic, really expensive coach — me!

Section by Section

Inside of context, you can see **Listening/Watching** or exposure up there at 12:00 in gold. We talked about the importance of listening to hundreds of hours of a new language before one attempts to understand it or use it.

Clockwise in orange is **Content Words**, which is the fancy name for *Important Words*. You know they are the stressed words in conversation, and you can see the significant weight this pattern carries in meaning. A handful of important words properly stressed will get your learner food, clothing, shelter, directions, a hot date... They should know this the day you meet them.

The other big section in purple on the left is **Body Language**.

Body Language

Some estimate body language (non-verbal cues) make up upwards of 80% of messages. Maybe 80% is a high figure in many instances, but it was certainly the case in our friend Pablo's story. Look at his reliance on gestures to save that woman's life and relate his story to us.

When he found his seat, **he sat down, stood up, sat down, then stood up again** — which was even more unusual. *Pablo, do you have something to tell the class?* He did. Using important words and **animated gestures**, Pablo shared his story. We learned he lived on the outskirts of town, and he was waiting for his bus that morning at the usual time. The only other person at his stop was an elderly woman. Without warning, she made a **deep coughing sound, grabbed at her chest and fell to the ground. Pablo recreated the scenario perfectly.** The **look of panic and horror on his face** told us a lot about his experience. Pablo was shocked and afraid. He had no idea how to help this woman and he feared she was going to die because he didn't speak English.

Pablo could see a security guard in the lobby of a nearby factory. **He mimed running to the building, flattening himself against the plate glass window and pounding his arms against it.** The guard opened the door a crack. **Pablo demonstrated by holding his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.** I think the security guard thought the kid was crazy - I would be. He asked Pablo what he wanted. **Pablo thumped his chest with his hand, pointed to the bus stop** and uttered,

Woman, heart, bus! The security guard understood immediately and called 911. **Pablo punched his finger three times into the palm of his hand as if it held a cell phone.** I asked my student, How long did it take the ambulance to get there? Five minutes, he answered **holding up his right hand displaying five fingers.**

How is the woman?

He cupped his left hand over his nose and mouth mimicking an oxygen mask and drew a few deep breaths. Fine **he nodded and smiled.**

Everyone cheered, but I wasn't quite finished. *How much grammar did you use?* **He thought about it for a minute then made a circle with the tip of his thumb and forefinger** — zero.

He didn't so much tell us the story as perform it.

FYI

Why are people so difficult to understand on the phone? Because we can't see them move. People move their bodies on content words. Important words are easy to discern face to face because their significance is punctuated by the speaker's body movement. Native speakers flick their hands, lean forward, nod their heads... on content words. They actually can't help it. Conversely, native speakers can't move their bodies on unimportant words. Go ahead; try and move on *if* or *at* or *the*... can't do it.

Most body language is universal. If you were dropped into Siberia or the jungles of Africa, you'd have food and shelter by nightfall using body language alone. Context and body language can get you surprisingly far. Your students will be relieved to discover **successful basic conversation is well within their grasp** because it has **nothing whatsoever to do with their grammar or their accent.** This chart should set them free and help you focus on what is vital for your students to build their skills.

Strategies: What to Do When All Else Fails

The last section in the Elements of Conversation chart, the small pink sliver at the very bottom, is Strategies. Teach your students backup plans — what to do if nothing works. I like to call these Plan B or C or D...

- **Draw** a picture is good for women who probably carry a purse with a pen and paper in it.
- **Spell** out what you want if pronunciation fails you.
- **Ask** for help, which is my go-to solution.
- **Mime** like a street performer.
- **Enroll** a translator; chances are excellent someone nearby speaks a bit of English.
- **Search** in a pocket dictionary.
- **Use** your imagination.

Sometimes (always, in my case) things don't go as I plan, but they always work out in the end. Reassure learners not to worry about failure. There is no such thing. There are only learning experiences.

Chart Summation

The *Elements of Conversation* shows what's necessary to have perfectly effective conversations in English. Conversation works because of context, important words, and body language — not grammar or accent — no matter the students' level. What you need to do is give learners the tools — **word stress**, **listening skills** and **confidence** — to interact with strangers. The Experiential Learning guys really have the right idea. *English Out There*, *On the Spot Language*, *The Global Approach*, *Speaking Made Simple*, *WizTango* and there are others that prepare students for success, support the heck out of them and get learners in the real world having fruitful interactions (without being perfect) in as little as a few hours. In the real world is where fluency lives. Get learners out there and successful without being perfect, as soon as you can. Today. Right now. Go. Do it. It will all work out.

Why Doncha Juspea Kinglish?

3 How Words Run Together

The final chapter in this volume on **conversation** in English is *how weirdly* words run together. After everyone talks too fast, which we solved by having learners listen faster, a huge conversation block for non-native speakers is that they can't recognize vocabulary they've studied when they hear native speakers talk. It's because those word units aren't there. Conversation flows like water; it takes the physically easiest route. The bad news is the easiest route rearranges sounds, syllables and words in a completely new and unrecognizable way. The good news is that it is always exactly the same way. There's a pattern.

Words rarely occur as word units in conversation. Conversation is mostly words strung together. The phenomenon of words running together is known as **Connected Speech** or **Linking**. It helps your students immeasurably when you give them the decoder ring so they can unscramble what they hear on their own. It's easy, and it's fun.

Connected Speech Backstory

To get your head around what happens so you can teach it, you need to know what makes a consonant a consonant and what makes a vowel a vowel. All these years, you've known **a** is a vowel and **b** is a consonant, but unless you read *Cracking the Code (Book One)*, did you know why?

Consonant sounds stop. Try a few /b/, /d/, /f/, /g/, /m/. Sound is stopped or restricted.

Vowel sounds stretch. Get your rubber band and stretch it out wide as you say /Ayyyyyy/, /Eyyyy/, /Owwwwww/. Vowel sounds stretch; they are unrestricted.

This is important.

Physically, the easiest way for humans to speak is by starting all words inside of sentences with STOPPED sounds. That's all there is to it. Here is the low-down on all three possible circumstances:

- **Vowel sounds** can be pronounced at the **beginning of a sentence** or phrase.
- Regardless of spelling, **all words begin with consonant sounds inside of sentences.**
- **Double consonants** are only pronounced once.

Sentences (and phrases) can start with a vowel sound or a consonant sound. Fine, whatever. The interesting part happens inside sentences. Once a sentence begins, all words inside it (interior words) must start with consonant sounds. This is unbelievably cool. There are only three possible scenarios that cover how words run together in the phenomenon known as Linking or Connected Speech.

CC Consonant • Consonant

The third bullet on the pronunciation of **double consonants** is a good segue (lead in).

Q: How many sounds can you hear when double consonants (the same consonant twice) occur in words? Say the words: carrot, hammer, balloon, shopping, Lloyd, mitt, class, committee...

A: Once. You are absolutely right.

If you didn't get this, you have to shake off some silly practice propagated by the BBM (Big Book of Mistakes). The dictionary divides words into syllables by convention, not logic or listening. If the dictionary were useful, it would divide words as they are pronounced, not how they look. car/rot? really? Try ca/rrot, like it sounds /**ke** rot/.

Got it. Ignore spelling. Double consonants in words are only pronounced once.

/ha mer/, /ba luwn/, /sho ping/, /loyd/, /klas/, /ku mi dey/...

This is true of consonants between words as well.

How many times do you pronounce the consonant when the first word ends with the same consonant sound as the next word starts?

big girl, good dog, her rabbit, black coffee, some money, Tim Martin...

/bi_girl/, /goo_dog/, /he_rabbit/, /bla_coffee/, /so_money/, Ti_Martin/...

Amazing?

Linking is so powerful it happens when sounds are even similar.

big cat, break ground, have fun, half volume, what day, played tag...

/bi_cat/, /brea_ground/, /ha_fun/, /ha_volume/, /wha_day/,
/play_tag/...

There is one exception that isn't really an exception because this isn't as much about spelling as sound. It is cc as in accept and success. Each c makes a different sound. The first c is /k/ and the second is /s/.

CV Consonant • Vowel

The next scenario is when the first word ends in a consonant sound and the next word starts with a vowel sound. Words inside sentences or phrases can't start with vowel *sounds*, so watch what happens.

Q: What happens when an interior word starts with a vowel sound?

A: Steal the consonant from the previous word to make the second word start with a consonant.

Don't believe me? Try it.

come over, turn on, stop arguing, give everyone...

/ku_mover/, /tur_non/, /sto_parguing/, /gi_veveryone/...

Oh, yes, native speakers do it all the time; worse, ESL teachers rarely if ever mention it to learners. Teachers just generally repeat the thoughtless things teachers or parents said to them, like **loo hi du pin the dikshunery** – as if speaking words were in the dictionary. They aren't! A standard dictionary is a writing tool, not a speaking tool.

Look how many variations you get when you count oranges, none of which *a rin the dikshunery*.

one orange	/wʊ n orunj/
two oranges	/tu w orunjuz/
three oranges	/θrɪ y orunjuz/
four oranges	/fo r orunjuz/
five oranges	/fi v orunjuz/
six oranges	/sɪk s orunjuz/
seven oranges	/seve n orunjuz/
eight oranges	/Ay d orunjuz/

My go-to Consonant • Vowel linking example:

Can I have a bit of egg? /kɑ nly ha va bi da veg/

Linking was a Rude Awakening for Me — Rosie's Story

Late one afternoon, my Adult ESL class was just leaving the computer lab when a middle-aged student of Chinese descent asked me, "Teacher, what means *noff*?"

I said, there is no such word as *noff*, and asked if she remembered where she heard it?

"You, teacher. You say *noff*"

"I said noff?" I was incredulous. "Do you remember the sentence?"

She answered without hesitation. **"Now teacha"**, you say, **"Tur noff you computa."**

OMG! Rosie was 100% correct. I did say *noff*! I had no idea!

But what could I tell her?

Ah, yes. I looked down at my watch and shrugged my shoulders. Unfortunately, we are out of time for today. We'll have to talk about *noff* tomorrow.

I had 24 hours to figure out *noff* and how I actually talked.

What I learned from Rosie

Once again, it was abruptly brought to my attention — in spite of using English all my life and having two degrees in it, I remained blissfully unaware of how I use it.

The third and final circumstance where internal words don't begin with vowel sounds.

VV Vowel • Vowel

Are you fascinated, or is it just me?

When one word ends with a vowel sound and the next word starts with one, humans must separate them with a consonant. You know this already from **A** and **An**. You probably think that words starting with vowels take **An** and words starting with consonants take **A**, but you'd be wrong. Look at **a unicorn**, **a European vacation**, **a one-eyed man**, **an honest answer** and **an honor** to meet you...

If you are looking back at your education with a jaundiced eye, you should be. It was crap.

The real story about **A** and **An** is **a** precedes consonant **sounds** regardless of spelling and **an** precedes vowel **sounds** regardless of spelling. It isn't a spelling thing; it's a speaking thing.

When two vowels come together between words, either the consonant **y** or **w** is injected in between, regardless of spelling.

With fresh eyes, look at our old friend the verb 'to be'. It's rife with vowel • vowel connections.

I _am	/I y am/
you _are	/yU w ar/
she _is	/shE y iz/
he _is	/hE y iz/
we _are	/wE y ar/

How do you know which to put in, a **y** or a **w**? Eventually, you'll be able to hear it, but for now, check the Thompson Vowel Chart. It's on there. **I** is White /**y**/; you is Blue /**w**/; she, he and we are Green /**Ey**/... Word stress, pronunciation and linking are all in EPA and the color of the word — no exceptions.

Practice Speaking Like a Native Exercise

Linking Vowel to Vowel

the end, be on time, no answer, I often, do it, you open it, go on...

/the yend/, /be yon time/, /no wanswer/, /I yoften/, /do wit/,
/you wope nit/, /go won/...

Learners NEVER have to talk this way, but they do have to understand that this how native speakers talk to them (and have no idea that they are doing it).

The Fourth Principle: All interior words begin with consonant sounds.

Human speaking is lazy. The easiest route is to start with stopped (consonant) sounds. Sentences can begin with stretched (vowel) sounds but once a sentence (or phrase) has begun that is it, all subsequent (internal) words must begin with consonant sounds. It's physiological. No exceptions. Spelling of individual words has little to no impact on pronunciation.

The Purpose of Book 3 is about decoding the strange way people talk, wherein learners can't distinguish vocabulary they've studied. Let's revisit the examples of how people talk from this book. Are they easier to read now?

nowun kan readdinglish

Ja kno wha dly mean?

jawanna gedda cuppa coffee.

Havya hajer coffee?

Linking Exercise

My Heart Will Go On and On

God bless James Cameron and the Titanic movie for making this song familiar to everyone in the world. Have the song playing in the room when your student or students come in. They know it. The exercise is to find the words in the black column on the left that start with *vowels*, then fix the *linking*: The answers are on the right in red.

Then play the song.

HOT TIP for Linking: Look for the words that start with vowels, steal a consonant, or stick in a **y** or a **w** — it's easier than you think.

My Heart Will Go **Wo Nan Don**

Every night **in** my dreams

I see you **I** feel you.

That **is** how **I** know you go **on**.

Far **a**cross the distance

And spaces between **us**

You have come to show you go **on**.

Near, far, wherever you **are**

I believe that the heart does go **on**.

Once more you **o**pen the door

And you're here **in** my heart

And my heart will go **on** and **on**.

Love can touch **us** **o**ne time

And last for **a** lifetime

Every nigh **din** my dreams

I see you **wI** feel you

Tha **dis** ho **wI** know you go **won**

Fa **ra**cross the distance

And spaces betwee **nus**

You have come to show you go **won**

Near, far, wherever you **ware**

I believe that the hear **_does** go **won**

Once **more** you **wopen** the door

And you're he **rin** my heart

And my heart will go **wo nan don**

Love can tu **chusw**one time

And last fo **ra** lifetime

And never let go till we're gone.

Love was when I loved you

One true time I hold to

In my life we'll always go on.

Near, far, wherever you are

I believe that the heart does go on.

Once more you open the door

And you're here in my heart

And my heart will go on and on.

You're here, there's nothing I fear,

And I know that my heart will go on.

We'll stay forever this way

You are safe in my heart

And my heart will go on and on.

And never let go till we're gone

Love was when I loved you

One true time I hold to

In my life we always go on

Near, far, wherever you are

I believe that the heart does go on

Once more you open the door

And you're here in my heart

And my heart will go on and on

You're here, there's nothing I fear

And I know that my heart will go on

We'll stay forever this way

You are safe in my heart

And my heart will go on and on

Your students will love hearing themselves singing perfectly in English and they may do it at the top of their lungs! For four whole minutes they sounded exactly like a native speaker. It's a rush that never goes away.

You did it. You taught your students what to worry about and what not to worry about, so they can get out there and converse!

Conclusion

It's not study that leads to conversation proficiency, it's authentic practice. The three critical skills have been identified and taught. With the *Thompson Vowel Chart*, a big loopy elastic band and your tutelage, learners can now:

1. **figure out** and **remember** the **pronunciation** of words on their own
2. **listen quickly** and **confidently** because they only listen for the **important words**
3. **understand connected speech** and why vocabulary they hear never sounds like vocabulary they have studied

Word stress on important words is your value proposition, and nothing can compare with it. Backpackers don't know everything English teachers know, and don't need to. If the goal is to make the biggest difference in the shortest time and have learners out in the world talking their way to fluency, the skills you have taught them are not just students' keystones but teacher keystones, too.

By providing context for the studying pupils have endured so far (all writing and no speaking), teaching *fast listening* and providing a roadmap that works for *pronunciation* no matter where they go, who they talk to or what vocabulary they encounter, learners have the tools and the confidence they need to go forth and be as successful as they chose to be with basic English conversation skills. Not many 'qualified' teachers can do that.

More information isn't the secret. The right bits of information are the ticket, and that is exactly what Backpackers now know how to provide. Go get 'em tiger! And you are welcome!

I beg your pardon? What about the elements of fluency?

Those, my friends, are in Book Three, *You Don't Say*.

FOR PEOPLE WITH NO TRAINING WHO NEED TO TEACH ENGLISH

"My beginner class at church has embraced this new way of learning to speak and listen. Today we met at the mall to practice and the whole group was able to speak with confidence! Thank you."

CINDY ALLRED – EDUCATOR

"There are a lot of English training centers in my country, but they always talk about grammar—not like you. I follow your way which you also talked about in TED show. English is a stress-base language. The result is awesome! I can speak to google translator and it can recognize what I said."

HUYNH VĂN HIẾU – VIET NAM

"I went through my interview with two recruiters. I got the job. I can say all this happened because of your method Judy Thompson."

BARINDER SINGH GREWAL – LAW ENFORCEMENT

"**This is it.** I studied English for many years, but it didn't make sense until this program. Now I can speak English with anyone, anywhere, on anything!"

PAOLA MOLINA – HUMAN RESOURCES

"I very much appreciate your work. What I like about your approach is that you hold learning as transformational. Your ideas provide meaningful tools to help learners on their way to competency in English."

TERRANCE KELLER – UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL

**The secret to great language coaching
is not in sharing everything you know about English
but in finding out exactly what your students
need to know and teaching that.**

– JUDY THOMPSON



JUDY THOMPSON, BA, TESL certification, pronunciation expert, author and TEDx speaker doesn't want you to know how long she's been teaching but decades ago she realized traditional methods for teaching English were missing the mark. She took away the jargon, grammar and silliness, pared the language down to its bare essentials and teaches the simple patterns that are always true. Judy designed a system basic enough for laymen to teach that makes pronunciation, conversation and fluency accessible to every learner.

www.backpackersenglish.com

**NEED FOR
SPEED**

Book Two of Three

ISBN 978-0-9812058-5-4



9 780981 205854