

# CLEAR ENGLISH SPEECH



Six tips to reduce your foreign accent  
and improve your English pronunciation.



BY LISA CYTRYNBAUM

**When learning a new language**, people tend to first focus on the vocabulary and grammar; pronunciation often gets overlooked. It is quite common for words to be mispronounced or stressed incorrectly, making it difficult for others to understand.

Often, foreign language speakers learn English at a young age in their own countries. In these situations, it is common for the English teacher to have spoken English with a foreign accent, making it difficult for their students to learn accurate English pronunciations.

I created this guide to help foreign language speakers, like you, improve the clarity of your spoken English. Clear speech helps to create ease in any interaction, regardless of whether it is formal or informal, professional or social, with a group or an individual.

**My goal is to help you build confidence in your speaking abilities.**

Being a good communicator will open the door for more success professionally, and richer connections with the people you care about.

I have included six techniques in this guide; each one will have a significant impact on the clarity of your spoken English. I recommend trying the techniques one at a time.

Since it can be difficult to judge your own speech in the moment, try recording yourself as you practice. Listening to your recordings will help you determine which techniques have the greatest impact.

Remind yourself throughout the day to use the technique you feel to be most effective. Choose certain times or certain routines, such as when you answer the phone, or when you order a coffee, to put the techniques to use.

With regular practice these techniques will become more natural in your speech, making you more understandable to native English listeners.

- *Lisa Cytrynbaum*

## USE STRATEGIC PAUSING

Pausing is one of the easiest ways to improve your speech clarity. Speaking English without using pauses is the equivalent of writing without using spaces or punctuation.

**You should pause between your phrases, before punctuation marks and before conjunctions** (words that join phrases such as: *and, or, if, though, but, because*).

I like to think of pausing as *Thought Chunking*. This technique involves inserting pauses between ideas; anywhere you would place a comma or a period if you were to write it down. Using pauses to create space between your thoughts allows your listener to process each thought separately and more easily understand your message.

When you chunk your speech into phrases you'll get into a rhythm and feel more ease as a speaker. Avoid breaking your phrases up by pausing between each word. This will sound choppy and make it unclear where the phrases end.

I highly recommend pausing during introductions. **Always insert a small pause between your first and last name.** When introducing yourself to someone of a different nationality, your name might be unfamiliar. They may be unsure where your first name ends, and your last name begins, unless you insert a small pause. This one pause will help them hear and remember your name, which is especially important when interviewing.

Using more pauses will not feel natural. That's because it is different from how you have been speaking all this time. Stick with it until it does feel natural.

## STRETCH YOUR VOWELS

There is a lot of attention given to consonants, and while consonant errors can contribute to a heavy accent, so can vowel errors. Stretching your vowel sounds controls your speaking rate and will slow you down, making your speech easier for others to listen to.

Here are some guidelines to help you know when to stretch out your vowels:

- English has long and short vowels. Long vowels should be stretched. A general guideline is, ***if the vowel sound matches the name of the letter alphabetically, it is a long vowel and should be stretched.*** For example: take (a), week (e), right (i), bone (o), rude (u).
- In English we ***stress the important syllables and words.*** Stress conveys that the word has more "weight". You can indicate stress by stretching out the vowel in the syllable or word.
- The consonant following a vowel will influence vowel length. ***Vowels should be stretched if they are followed by a voiced consonant*** (b, d, g, m, n, l, z, v, r). So, the "a" in "man" will be stretched whereas the "a" in "mat" will be short, and the "i" in "big" will be stretched whereas the "i" in "bit" will be short.

North American English has approximately 15 different vowel sounds, including diphthongs (two vowel sounds combined). In comparison, many other languages have only 5 vowel sounds and do not differentiate between long and short vowels.

So, stretching your vowel sounds may feel strange and will require practice. But, this one change will have a noticeable impact on your speech clarity.

For words you find particularly difficult to pronounce, check the correct pronunciation with an **online audio dictionary**, such as: <https://forvo.com/>. You can choose an audio model for either a single word or an expression containing the word (such as "right" or "right now"). You can select an audio model by geographical location (I recommend Canada or the United States), or by gender. Each model has received votes indicating the number of listeners who felt the word was pronounced well. I suggest choosing speakers with a higher number of *good* votes.

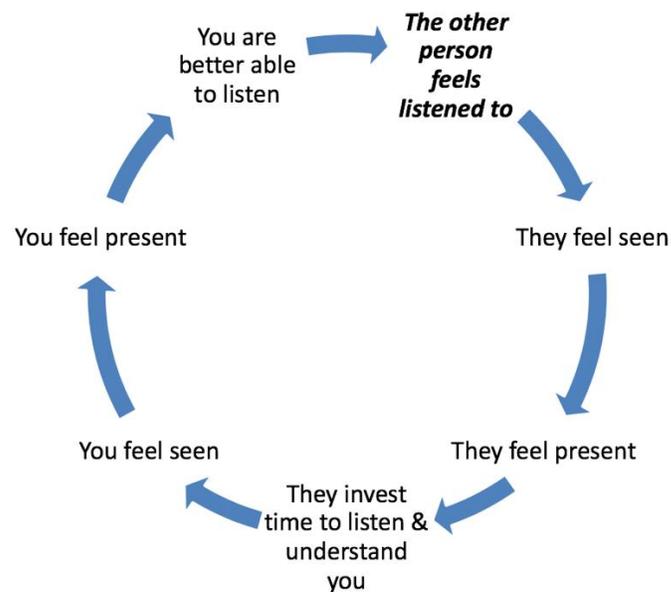
## STEP UP YOUR LISTENING

The English language contains some sounds that may not be present in your native language. These unique sounds are particularly more challenging for foreign language speakers to hear. The reason for this is that sound perception is not solely based on the information captured by your ears but is also influenced by information already stored in your brain. Your brain expects to hear the sounds it is already familiar with.

If you are not using “focused listening” you might not notice that a new and unfamiliar sound was used. **If you mis-hear a sound in a word, you will say it as you mis-heard it.**

Another good reason to step up your listening is made clear with the **“Listening Circle”**.

When you truly listen to someone it brings them to a state of presence with you, which results in them investing more time listening to you and making more effort to understand you. So, listening to them results in them better understanding you. And when you feel listened to, you also feel more present and become a better listener. Listening yields more listening, which yields better understanding.



## DON'T LEAVE OFF THE FINAL SOUND

Many other languages tend to end words with vowels. Some of these languages include Japanese, Italian, Romanian, Telugu and Kannada (both languages spoken in India), Tamil (spoken in India and Sri Lanka), Sanskrit and the Bantu languages of Africa.

English differs from other languages as there is often a voiced consonant (a sound in which your vocal cords are vibrating, such as *b, d, g, z, v*) at the end of a word. Studies have demonstrated that native English speakers have trouble understanding others when the final voiced consonant of a word is left off.

**One of the ways to make the consonant sound at the end of the word "voiced" is to hold the vowel that comes before it for two beats.** The pairs below contain words that differ only in the length of the vowel, which is held longer for the first word in each pair (the word with the voiced final sound).

*robe – rope, bead – beat, pig – pick, fuzz – fuss, save – safe*

I suggest you create sentences for each of these words. Record yourself saying the sentences so you can go back and check if you are holding the vowel long enough.

Another interesting fact about the ends of English words is that sounds, and syllables, are added to word endings to indicate grammatical information, such as past tense or plurals. So, in English, leaving off the final sound of a word can change the meaning. In many other languages, this type of grammatical information occurs separate from the word, often preceding it.

English has many words that differ only by the last sound. Omitting the last sound in a word may leave your listener confused and guessing which word you intended to say. Leaving off the final sound in the word "*back*" could leave your listener trying to determine if you were referring to the *back*, the *bag*, the *band*... you get the idea.

## NAIL THE “TH” SOUND

“TH” is arguably one of the most difficult sounds for foreign language speakers to pronounce. The “TH” sound exists in very few other languages and is unfamiliar to many foreign speakers. As a result, people often substitute a sound they are familiar with, such as “d” or “z”.

***The “TH” sound occurs in many frequently used English words, so it's important you get it right. Practice in front of a mirror.***

First, place the tip and only the tip of your tongue between your teeth. This should be almost imperceptible. It will feel strange because it is unfamiliar, not because you are doing it incorrectly. Next, allow a small but steady airstream to exit your mouth as you would if you were to pronounce “s”.

Once you can make the sound, practice it in the words below, adding the vowel as you pull your tongue tip back in your mouth.

- the
- that
- there
- this
- those
- they
- think
- thing

Some other ways to practice the “TH” sound:

- Count from “thirty” to “thirty-nine” while looking in the mirror.
- Alternate between a “TH”-initial word and another word that contrasts only in the initial sound such as, ***they – day*** or ***there – dare*** or ***thing – sing***.
- Write down a few of your opinions, keeping them short. Next read them aloud starting with ***“I think that...”***

## PROJECT YOUR VOICE

Foreign language speakers often talk with a soft voice. A soft speaking voice is a habit that often develops due to feeling self-conscious about your speaking skills. This can be problematic because a soft voice will reduce your intelligibility and contribute to your listener's difficulty understanding you.

***Projecting your voice is much more than just talking louder. Voice projection involves speaking from your core and directing your voice. You should not feel any strain in your throat. Voice Projection is especially helpful when speaking to a group of people or in a noisy environment.***

Start by breathing from your belly, not from your chest. Speak on your exhalation aiming your voice approximately ten feet ahead of you. Imagine a straight line from your mouth to your listener and imagine your listener as a funnel collecting your voice. You may notice a sense of vibration in your mouth or on your lips from the increase in resonance, just as you would if you were humming.

I recommend practicing voice projection alone. Use words that begin with sounds you can hold and feel on your lips or in your mouth. ***Choose words that start with "m - n - z - l"***. Once you are comfortable projecting your voice with single words, use short phrases beginning with these same English sounds. ("No one knows", "Let's leave later"). Eventually you can practice voice projection using a few consecutive sentences.



**My name is Lisa Cytrynbaum.**

At a very early age I learned to appreciate the importance and impact of clear communication. I have enjoyed supporting people of all ages to improve their communication skills for over 25 years as a certified Accent Reduction Trainer in the Compton PESL Accent Modification Method and as a registered Speech-Language Pathologist.

I truly enjoy working with people who are motivated to learn, expand and create the changes they desire. And, I love learning from people of different cultures and backgrounds.

Good communication skills play a key role in opening doors, generating professional opportunities and enhancing careers. I am honored to work with people on their accents and witness their confidence increase as they learn to speak English with greater clarity.

If you have any questions, or would like to connect, please reach out.

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