

Fluency tips

A question from Roberto in Brazil

I'd like to know about fluency. What can I do to feel better when I'm talking to other people? Do we have some way to learn it faster? Please help me!

Susan Fearn answers:

So, Roberto wants to know how to become more fluent in English, and this is something he wants to be able to do 'fast'. I know you're writing this from Brazil Roberto, but you don't say whether or not you get to meet English speakers much. If you do, the first rule of becoming more fluent is to listen, not just to native speakers of English but also to very good users of English as a second language - the kind of speaker that I guess you'd like to become. If you don't get to meet many speakers of English, then listen to radio, TV or films in English. Listen to the BBC!

The next step is to notice what it is that speakers of English do, which makes them sound fluent. The first trick is to probably have confidence; a good user of a language isn't afraid to speak. Some people are afraid to speak a foreign language because they think they might make mistakes. Don't worry about that. Your listeners will usually try hard to understand you - a few grammar errors aren't going to worry them.

What you do need to worry about, though, is pronunciation, and in particular, **stress**. By '**stress**', I mean that some parts of a word or sentence are stronger and louder than others. For example, if I say:

Roberto's from Brazil

the stressed or strong parts are **bert** and **zil**.

Roberto's from Brazil

Stress differs from language to language and it's likely that you transfer some of your Portuguese patterns when you speak English - and this could make you sound less fluent.

When you learn a new word or expression, learn it with its stress. There are some rules for word stress in English but they're very complicated with a lot of exceptions! The easiest thing to do is to learn the stress with the word. Notice how a native speaker says it or look in a dictionary.

Here's a little test: Can you spot the stress in these words?

English

BBC

university

Again:

English

BBC

university

And did you get that? It's English with the stress on **Eng**, BBC with the stress on the first **B**, and university with the stress on **ver**.

In a whole sentence or utterance, the stress is usually on the words which carry the most meaning. That's often the nouns, the main verbs, the adjectives and adverbs.

Listen to this sentence and see if you can spot the stress:

Roberto has been learning English for ten years.

And again:

Roberto has been learning English for ten years.

And the stress is on **bert, learn, Eng, ten years.**

Roberto has been learning English for ten years.

And if you start listening, for example, to BBC interviews and think of this, you'll begin to notice the stress and the rhythm of English.

So, how far have we got? Confidence, not worrying too much, pronunciation, stress... What else?

Well, another good thing that speakers of English do is to have a few tricks up their sleeves for when they need to give themselves thinking time because they're searching for what to say next. And they use 'filler sounds' like **er, um** and so on.

Another thing that English speakers do is make words longer:

well...

so...

And there are a range of other expressions they use too, special expressions like

So what I'm saying is...

Do you see what I mean?

You know...

So, listen and notice what some of these expressions are that people use to win extra time.

Another thing that it's useful to know how to do is how to bring other speakers into your conversation so that you keep them interested - and this often done by asking questions.

What do you think?

What do you reckon?

How do you feel about this?

and so on...

So, to become a fluent speaker, you'll need to put into practice all these kind of things. And there's the key: practise, practise, practise.

- If you do have English-speaking friends, meet up with them as much as possible.
- Try and put yourself in a position where you're the only one who doesn't have first language or very fluent English.
- Find a language exchange partner - someone who wants to practise your language in return. One of my students was a speaker of Chinese who was learning English; he found an English person who was learning Chinese and they did half an hour of each language.

If you can't do any of that, you'll have to agree with another learner of English that you're going to have – say - an hour a day speaking just English. And if that's not possible, use English with yourself, inside your head. Think in English. It does work! It's what I do with French. I've got no one in my house who speaks French, and so to practise, I talk to the cat – in French. *Bonjour chat!* My daughter thinks it's very, very funny!

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