

Skills 360 – Communicating Clearly in English (Part 1)

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think is the hardest aspect of English pronunciation?
2. Can you think of times when you've used idioms or slang that your listeners didn't understand?
3. Are there abbreviations you use in your line of work that people in other fields might not understand?

Vocabulary

To get a message across: to successfully make someone understand; "Adding some charts, graphs, or other visuals to your presentation can help you get your message across."

Accent: a way of speaking or pronouncing that is particular to a region, social class, or group; "Judging by his accent, I'd say that Martin is from South Africa."

Rich: varied and interesting; "Barcelona is a great place to do business, and it's got a rich cultural scene as well."

Enunciation: clear pronunciation; "Our teacher helps students with their enunciation by having them look at a mirror when they speak."

Lazy: not spending a lot of energy; "Hey Frank, I'm sorry but your handwriting is so lazy that I can't read a word that you've written here."

To blend: combine into one; "Our new model blends the power of a sports car with the spaciousness of an SUV."

Reduced speech: a way of talking where words are shortened or combined and sounds are changed or dropped; "One of the most common examples of reduced speech in American English is saying 'wanna' instead of 'want to.'"

To impact: to have an effect on or to influence; "Rising gas prices have impacted more than just trucking companies and airlines."

To tend to: to usually do something; "When a new Starbucks opens, real estate values in the surrounding neighborhood tend to rise."

To mumble: to speak quietly and unclearly; "Terry mumbled a lot in his presentation so I couldn't hear what he was saying."

Clarity: how clear something is; "The new Bose headphones provide unmatched clarity of sound."

To grasp: to understand; "It was obvious from the confused looks on everyone's faces that they really couldn't grasp what I was saying."

To proceed to: to continue or do something next; "After buying out its major competitors, Forsyth Flooring proceeded to increase its prices."

To stick to: to continue to use or do; "I like the new MacBooks, but they're pretty expensive, so we've decided to stick to Windows laptops."

Arvo: afternoon, in Australian slang; "I'm too busy to look over your PowerPoint this morning Bruce, but ask me again in the arvo."

Off the hook: excellent, in American slang; "If we get a famous YouTuber like Ali-A for our new ads, young people are sure to think they're off the hook."

Acronym: an abbreviation made up of letters that form a word; "The acronym NASA stands for National Aeronautics and Space Administration."

Abbreviation: a short version of a word; "Maps typically use the abbreviations for road words, like 'st.' for 'street' and 'ave.' for 'avenue.'"

To get a point across: to make someone understand an idea or fact; "I explained my problem a dozen times, but I still couldn't get my point across to the guys in tech support."

Line of work: field of work; "I've been in marketing for fifteen stressful years, and I'm thinking of getting into a different line of work soon."

Common knowledge: something that almost everyone knows; "How do I know that the first American president was George Washington? Come on Josh, that's just common knowledge."

Roadblock: an obstacle or something that prevents you from achieving something; "Negotiations were going just fine until yesterday, when we hit a major roadblock."

Audience: people listening to or watching something; "It's great to start your presentation with a joke, but only if you're sure the audience will understand and appreciate it."

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons, and today I want to talk about communicating clearly in English.

Did you know that most of the conversations in English happening right now are between two non-native speakers? There's a German doing business in Malaysia, and a Russian talking on the phone with a Korean, and a Brazilian visiting Spain. And they're most likely using English to communicate with each other. But everyone has different levels of ability. So you have to try extra hard to [get your message across](#).

But it's not easy. After all, English is not a simple language. For one thing, it has more words and idioms than other languages. For another thing, there are many different varieties of English. So the English you hear in Singapore or Miami or London can sound quite different. Given this situation - people around the world using a difficult language at different levels - it's really important to be able to communicate clearly.

So how can we do that? Well, let's start with pronunciation. Of course, not everyone will, or should, speak exactly the same. Perfect pronunciation doesn't exist, since there are so many different [accents](#). And this variety of accents makes the language interesting, and [rich](#). But it *is* important that people understand each other.

Being clear isn't so much about pronunciation as it is about [enunciation](#). Enunciation simply means pronouncing things clearly and carefully. In fact, most language learners have two kinds of pronunciation. They have a [lazy](#) pronunciation they use when they're speaking with people of the same first language, or when they're tired. And they have a careful pronunciation. It takes more effort, but if you want your message to be clear, it's important.

It's not just a matter of laziness. Sometimes it's a matter of skill. I mean, you might have learned how native English speakers [blend](#) sounds together between words. So "would you" becomes "wouldja," and "going to" becomes "gonna." That's great in some situations. And it's natural. But this [reduced speech](#), as we call it, is not always clear. Besides, it sounds a bit too informal in most business situations.

Two other things that [impact](#) pronunciation are speed and volume. When we're uncomfortable or nervous, we [tend to](#) speed up and speak more softly. But speaking quickly and quietly can damage our pronunciation. We're more likely to [mumble](#) this way. Instead, slow down a bit and speak a bit more loudly. This will add [clarity](#) to your speech. And people will be more likely to [grasp](#) what you're saying.

Clarity is also affected by the words we choose. The important thing here is to keep it simple. When you're giving someone instructions on the phone, or making an important point in a presentation, it's not the time to impress people with your vocabulary. This is especially true with verbs. Don't say "produce" when you can say "make." Don't say "[proceed to](#)" when you can say "continue." And don't say "consider" when you can say "think about."

In other words, [stick to](#) expressions you know people will understand. That means you should avoid using too much slang and too many idioms. Slang and idioms are very regional. I mean, you can ask someone in Australia to meet you in the "[arvo](#)," but most other English speakers won't know that you mean "afternoon." And don't expect people outside the U.S. to understand when you say that something exciting was "[off the hook](#)."

When it comes to word choice, there's another thing to be careful with: [acronyms](#) and [abbreviations](#). You might use "TBH" quite often, but not everyone knows that it means "to be honest." Others might not know that TBA means "to be announced," or that "FYI" means "for your information." You don't have to use these abbreviations to [get your point across](#).

And you've probably been confused – and frustrated – when people use abbreviations that are common in *their line of work* but are not [common knowledge](#). If I mentioned "ESAC" in conversation, would you know that I was talking about the Engineering Safety Advisory Committee? Probably not. In fact, if I talked about ESAC, many listeners wouldn't assume that it was an abbreviation at all. They'd be thinking it was some kind of electronic sack, or bag.

As we've seen, there are a lot of potential [roadblocks](#) to understanding someone in English. And communicating clearly might mean we have to adapt what we say and how we say it, depending on the [audience](#). It's *always* a good idea to speak up and to speak clearly. And if you want to make sure everyone understands, it's wise to use simple and clear words, while avoiding slang, idioms, and abbreviations.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the [BusinessEnglishPod.com](#) website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. Communicating clearly in English can be challenging because... [Select all that apply]
 - A ... individuals may have different levels of ability.
 - B ... people tend to rely too much on email and texting.
 - C ... it has more words and idioms than other languages.
 - D ... native speakers have difficulty explaining the rules.
 - E ... there are so many different varieties of English.

2. What should the goal of pronunciation be?
 - A Native-like accent.
 - B Ability to speak different dialects.
 - C Understanding.
 - D American reduced speech.

3. Which of the following are important for clear enunciation? [Choose 2]
 - A Mumbling.
 - B Pronouncing carefully.
 - C Avoid talking with lazy people.
 - D Speaking quickly.
 - E Increasing volume.

4. Which of the following verbs would it be wise to avoid? [Select all that apply]
 - A Formulate
 - B Give
 - C Indicate
 - D Synthesize
 - E Tell
 - F Take

5. Why should you avoid a lot of idioms and slang?
 - A They are difficult to pronounce well.
 - B They are often very regional.
 - C They are constantly changing in meaning.
 - D They make people feel uncomfortable.

6. In order to be clear, you should use acronyms and abbreviations...
 - A ... as much as possible.
 - B ... only with people in the same field of work.
 - C ... with clear pronunciation.
 - D ... rarely.

Review Answers

1. Communicating clearly in English can be challenging because...
A ... individuals may have different levels of ability.
C ... it has more words and idioms than other languages.
E ... there are so many different varieties of English.
2. What should the goal of pronunciation be?
C Understanding.
3. Which of the following are important for clear enunciation?
B Pronouncing carefully.
E Increasing volume.
4. Which of the following verbs would it be wise to avoid?
A Formulate
C Indicate
D Synthesize
5. Why should you avoid a lot of idioms and slang?
B They are often very regional.
6. In order to be clear, you should use acronyms and abbreviations...
D ... rarely.