

LEARNING english

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writing

emails

spelling

vocabulary

conversation

pronunciation

**UPGRADE YOUR
ENGLISH**

**SHORT CUTS TO BETTER
ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS**

**BBC
WORLD
SERVICE**

Welcome

Learning English can be exciting and stimulating. Finding out that you can have a good conversation or write a letter to a friend in English can give your confidence a tremendous boost. However, it can sometimes be difficult to recognise the progress you are making. Learning English, like learning any new skill, takes time and patience – but there are some shortcuts which can help you make an almost instant improvement to your English language skills. This booklet introduces you to some ideas which can help you upgrade your English.

Using extracts from BBC World Service *Learning English* radio programmes, this booklet will help you to...

- ① get out of a learning rut.
- ② widen your vocabulary.
- ③ give yourself time to think in conversations.
- ④ change the tone of what you say.
- ⑤ keep the conversation going.
- ⑥ change your pronunciation.
- ⑦ improve your spelling.
- ⑧ upgrade your emails.

On the final page you will find a glossary explaining some of the words and phrases in the booklet. Words in the glossary are underlined.

How to use this booklet

Each page looks at a different topic. On each page, you'll find...

- a short introduction which explains the topic.
- an extract from one of the BBC World Service's *Learning English* programmes.
- a reading task to accompany the extract.
- key tips to help you upgrade your own use of English.
- a task to help you practise what has been explained.

Free radio programme schedules

Depending on where you are in the world, you can hear BBC World Service *Learning English* programmes on short wave, medium wave or FM. Details about programmes you can hear in your area and where to find them on your radio are contained in a series of programme schedules. You can get a programme schedule...

On the BBC World Service *Learning English* website

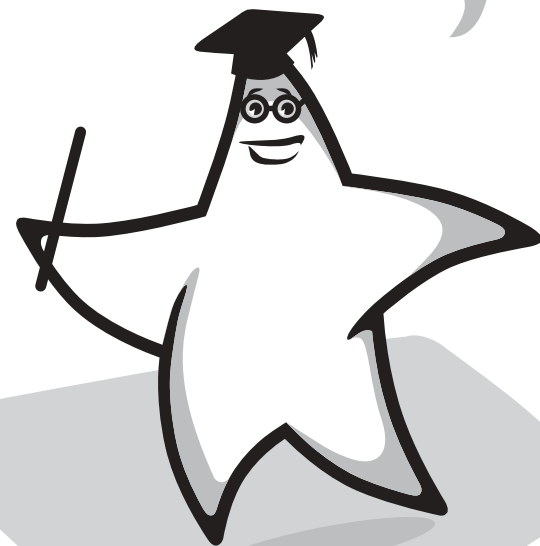
Go to: www.bbcworldservice.com/learningenglish/radio/highlights.shtml

By email

For an automated email response, send a blank email to: elradio@bbc.co.uk

By post

Write to us at: *Learning English*, BBC World Service, Bush House, London WC2B 4PH, UK



DOWNLOAD THIS BOOKLET FROM THE *LEARNING ENGLISH* WEBSITE

This study booklet is one of a series of booklets that can be downloaded from the *Learning English* website. Go to: www.bbcworldservice.com/learningenglish/radio/studyguides/index.shtml

1 Getting out of a learning rut

For many learners of English, expressing simple ideas can be quite easy. However, when you have mastered the basics of English, it can be a bigger challenge to express exactly what you want to say – in the way you want to say it. For this reason, many learners at intermediate level can find themselves in a learning rut – able to express their ideas but unable to make progress to a more sophisticated level of language use.

The BBC World Service programme **English Makeover** gives advice to learners who have reached a plateau in their learning. They can express their ideas clearly but would like to be able to use English more effectively.

In this extract from **English Makeover**, language teaching expert Karen Adams gives advice on how to get out of a learning rut.

Before you read the extract Think about your favourite BBC World Service programme. Imagine you have to describe it to an English-speaking friend. How many different adjectives could you use to describe the programme?

I think a major problem which learners have when they get to an intermediate level is to do with motivation. By this level, most people can express their ideas fairly adequately. The grammar and vocabulary may be quite simple but they can get the ideas across. It is at this point that learners really have to find a need to learn more – to vary how they speak and the ideas they express. This can be quite hard if you have a small circle of friends and you all share the same interests – because you will probably talk about the same things all the time. And if you talk with the same people all the time, you are unlikely to need a very wide range of vocabulary and expression. My advice to students is usually to find a new hobby or interest. For example, if there is a cultural centre in your town which shows films, why not go along to meet new people and talk about the films? If that's not possible, why not suggest that your language school or learning circle start a drama club? By putting yourself in a position where you need to use English in a different way to normal, you give yourself the need to learn.

1. Why can it be difficult to motivate yourself to learn when you are at an intermediate level?
2. What is Karen's main suggestion for getting out of a learning rut?

5 top tips for getting your English out of a rut

1. Find something new to talk about. One useful way of doing this is to start a reading group with friends. Each month, arrange to read a different book (preferably in English) then have a meeting to discuss it – in English. Make sure you choose a variety of different books so that you have to learn some new vocabulary each time.
2. Meet new people. If you only speak English with friends, you will probably use the same, informal language all the time. By joining a new club or going to events where you know English will be spoken, you will need to use a different register of English. If this isn't possible, forming a drama club can help you to create opportunities for using English in different ways.
3. Activate what you know already. Even in our first language, we all know or understand more words than we actively use. Try to test your knowledge by 'brainstorming'. Think of a topic and give yourself 5 minutes to write down all the words you know related to that topic. You may be surprised by how many you can remember.
4. Vary the programmes you listen to. For example, if you only listen to sports programmes, you will limit the vocabulary you learn to sport-related words. The wider the variety you listen to, the wider your vocabulary will become.
5. Set yourself some new learning goals. You can now express your ideas – but what would you like to be able to do next? By setting yourself clear goals to achieve over the next month, you will be able to revitalise your approach to learning English.

TASK Follow this procedure to set your own learning goals for the next month.

1. Think of 3 things which you have found difficult in English recently. This could be, for example, understanding the presenter of your favourite programme or understanding what you read in the newspaper.
2. Identify exactly what you would like to achieve in relation to these problems. But be careful – you only have one month. You cannot achieve everything in that time. Your goal could be 'to understand the sports pages of the newspaper' not 'to understand everything I read'.
3. List 3 things you are going to do to help you achieve your goal. For example, if your goal is 'to understand the presenter better', you could decide to record the programme, to listen to it once to find out how much you understand and to listen to it a second time to test yourself.
4. At the end of 4 weeks, look at your goals again. Try to test yourself. For example, in the fourth week, do not record the programme but test how much you understand on one listening.

② Widen your vocabulary

How do you learn new vocabulary? Do you write it down in a notebook? Do you spend a long time memorising lists of new words? Everyone has their own preferred way to ensure they remember new vocabulary. However, how successful are you when you try to use the vocabulary in a new situation?

In this extract from **English Makeover**, Karen Adams gives advice to some students who want to be able to use a wider range of words when they speak English.

Before you read the extract Write down 3 English words or phrases which you have learnt recently. Now look at them and answer these questions: Have you used these words in conversation or in writing since you learnt them? If so, when and why did you use them? How would you describe the meaning of each word or phrase to a friend?

One thing which learners often have problems with is expanding their active vocabulary – that is, the words which they actually use in conversation or in writing. Students have often told me that they feel their conversations are boring, that they can't really express exactly what they feel, because they simply don't have enough words. And this is the real problem – how do you learn the words which you are likely to need in conversation? All too often, I see learners write down lists of words in a notebook and I know they are never going to look at them again, or use them, simply because they're just not useful for that particular individual. I think there are two real keys to really widening your vocabulary. First of all, don't write down every new word you meet. Instead, make a conscious decision to choose the words or phrases you want to learn – because you feel they are useful or interesting or because they sound funny. I really feel that having an emotional attachment to new words or phrases you are far more likely to remember them. However, when you are choosing new words, remember that your short-term memory cannot hold much information. Try to limit your choice of words or phrases to 4 or 5, and make an effort to use them. This will be much more effective than making a list of 10 or 12 which you can't remember.

1. What does Karen mean by the term 'active vocabulary'? Why is it sometimes difficult for learners to expand their active vocabulary?
2. Read the text to find 2 suggestions for improving your active vocabulary. Close the booklet and either write or say the suggestions in your own words.

5 top tips for widening your vocabulary

1. Be selective in what you learn. Remember, you are much more likely to use words or phrases if you think they are useful or interesting so avoid the temptation to make long lists.
2. Make meaning families. If, for example, you are interested in music, try to group words and phrases which will actually help you to talk about music. For example, learning all the names of the instruments in an orchestra won't really help you make conversation – but learning the names of a few instruments, and adjectives to describe how their music makes you feel will allow you to talk about music.
3. Describe new words in your own words. By actively explaining what a new word or phrase means, you will be thinking about the word or phrase – and helping to fix it in your memory.
4. Read more English. One advantage of reading is that you will meet lots of new vocabulary. By using the text to help you work out what new vocabulary means, you can identify new words and phrases which will be useful for you.
5. Look for synonyms. When you read, you are unlikely to find the same words repeated over and over. Writers go to great lengths to avoid repeating words or phrases when discussing an idea. When you are reading, look for the number of different words the writer uses to express the same idea.

TASK

You can do this task with any English-language magazine or newspaper. You can also use a page from a book which you are reading.

1. Choose one article from a magazine or newspaper.
2. Read the article or page. While you are reading, identify the main character or idea which is being discussed.
3. Look back at the beginning of the article or page and identify the first reference to the character or idea. For example, if you are reading an article about the police arresting a criminal, look for the first word used to describe the criminal (for example 'a robber').
4. Now re-read the article. Try to identify each word which is used instead of 'a robber' (e.g. 'the criminal').
5. When you have finished reading, count the number of different words or phrases the writer has used to mean the same thing.

3 Giving yourself time to think in conversations

How often do you have a conversation in English? For many learners, being able to speak fluently in conversation is a main ambition. However, many say that fluency in speaking is difficult for them. They find it difficult to think of the words they need when someone asks them a question, and find that the conversation then has large, silent gaps in it.

In this extract from **English Makeover**, Karen Adams gives advice to Adela, a student from Germany, who wants to be able to speak more fluently.

Before you read the extract Imagine a friend has asked you for advice on how to speak more fluently. Think of two things you could tell him or her, then compare your suggestions with Karen's.

Adela says that, when she has a conversation, she feels that she is always searching for words so she has to stop and start again. And that makes her feel embarrassed, so the problem gets worse. This is a very common problem for learners – the feeling of panic when someone asks you a question and you can't answer immediately is a horrible feeling, and it can seriously affect your confidence. However, if you can work on strategies which give you thinking time in a conversation, you will be able to relax more – and become more fluent. It's important to have a set of noises and phrases which can fill the time while you are thinking – in English, long pauses in conversation are quite difficult to deal with. The most common sound you hear in English is 'ermm'. It's not a word – it's just a noise which fills the space while the person thinks of what to say. However, if you need more time, you need longer phrases. So, if someone asks a question, you could say 'Hmm, let me think...' in a gentle way – to show you are thinking. You can also repeat the main idea in the question. For example, if someone asks 'What's the time?' it's not unusual to hear 'The time? Ah, it's six thirty.' These are useful tricks to fill the silence while you think of what to say. And that's what fluency is all about – making sure that something happens in the conversation, even if it's only 'ermm'.

1. Karen mentions a common problem which affects fluency. What is it?
2. Find three things you can use to give yourself time to think in a conversation.

5 top tips for gaining more thinking time

1. Take one or two deep breaths before you begin to speak. If you are nervous or panicking, you need to calm down before you try to speak. If you don't, it will be more difficult to find the words you need.
2. Use 'thinking time' sounds and phrases to fill the silence. 'Ermm' and 'let me think' are two common ways used to give the speaker thinking time.
3. Learn phrases, not just words. If you have to build your sentence word by word, you need more thinking time. When learning vocabulary, try to identify chunks of language which you can use. For example, in the question 'Would you like a cup of coffee?', *Would you like a...* is a useful chunk which shows you are offering something to someone.
4. Ask for help or clarification. Remember that the person you are speaking with also wants the conversation to be successful. One good way to get thinking time is to ask the person to repeat what they said. Try using the phrase 'I'm sorry, I missed that. Can you say it again please?'
5. Work on paraphrasing. If you can't think of the word you need, say what you think in a different way. Avoiding the problem word is a useful way of solving the problem.

TASK Listening out for thinking time

Look at the BBC World Service programme schedule and choose a discussion programme which you think sounds interesting. As you listen, make a note of the things which the speakers say to give themselves thinking time. It could be 'well' or 'ermm' – or even longer phrases.

4 Changing the tone of what you say

Many learners of English worry about making mistakes with grammar or vocabulary. One important area which many forget about, however, is that of tone – how does the message sound to the listener? Does the speaker sound polite or aggressive? While many native speakers will make allowances for a learner's grammatical errors, many find that they are offended by something which they think sounds rude or aggressive. So how can you identify if your message is delivered in an appropriate tone?

In this extract from **Working English Magazine**, Ruth Whitbread describes how to change the tone of what you say to make sure you sound polite.

Before you read the extract Imagine you are having a conversation in your own language with an important person. This might be your boss, a business contact or the principal of your school. Think of examples of words or phrases you might use to show you were being polite.

If you have ever felt that you have caused offence when you have spoken English to someone, it may be that you're simply not using enough words to convey your message. Something that often surprises and confuses learners of English is the way that native speakers tend to use rather indirect language. British people, in particular, will use eight words where perhaps four might have been enough. And they do this even at work – a place where you'd think that shorter, clearer sentences would be better. So changing your message and speaking in a less direct way is an important issue for learners to get to grips with. For example, if someone at work asks you to do something, you may think 'That's impossible.' But saying this could appear impolite. However, there are lots of ways around it. You can prepare the listener for the fact that you are about to disagree by using the words 'well...' or 'actually...'. And if you know that what you are going to hear isn't the answer which the person wants, you could add the phrase 'I'm afraid'. Finally, British speakers often turn negative adjectives into positive ones to make bad news more acceptable, and put 'not' in front – so 'impossible' becomes 'not possible'. So, in the end 'That's impossible' becomes 'Actually, I'm afraid that's not possible.'

1. According to Ruth, what is the main reason for learners sounding impolite when they are speaking English?
2. Find 3 things Ruth says you can do to make bad news sound better.

5 top tips for sounding more polite.

1. Use the words 'actually' or 'well' to show that you are about to disagree. To British English ears, 'No' is too direct. 'Well, no' sounds as if you are taking the listener's feelings into consideration.
2. Use positive words with 'not' rather than negatives. So, instead of saying 'I disagree', you can say 'Actually, I don't agree.'
3. Make your advice or opinion sound like a suggestion. Use modal verbs such as 'could' and 'might' to make your advice more listener-friendly. So instead of saying 'You sound rude if you are too direct', you might say 'You could sound rude if you are too direct.'
4. Use question forms instead of imperatives. If you want someone to do something, question forms can soften your message. So, in a shop, instead of saying 'Give me a notepad' try 'Can I have a notepad?'
- 5 Use the phrase 'It's a bit...' or 'It's a little...' before adjectives instead of 'too'. When you hear 'Actually, your assignment is a bit late', the speaker really means 'The assignment is too late'.

TASK Become aware of vague language

Making your sentences longer and more vague might seem like a waste of words. It may seem over-polite or even dishonest. But, if you are listening to and speaking with British English speakers or people from other, more formal cultures, it is a useful thing to learn.

1. Re-read the first three sentences of the extract. Find three words which Ruth uses to make her message less direct.
2. Imagine you have to advise a British English speaker on how to be polite in your language. What advice would you give?

5 Keeping the conversation going

For many people, the main reason for learning English is for work or business. You may need to use English in meetings and in emails. However, one other area where English is very important is in making initial contact with people in your field of business or work. When you first meet, it is important to be able to chat so that you establish a good relationship with potential business contacts. This type of informal meeting often takes place at conferences or parties where you may meet many new people at once. Being able to network is an important skill, and one where good conversation skills are vital.

In this extract from **Working English Magazine**, marketing consultant Patrick Hoffman talks about successful networking.

Before you read the extract Imagine you are at a conference where there are many new potential business contacts. How would you start a conversation with one of them? Compare your ideas with Patrick's.

Networking effectively is a really important business skill. I suppose it's what we used to call 'making small talk' – having short conversations at social occasions with people you don't know, solely for the purpose of establishing contact. Of course, as the name suggests, 'networking' means speaking not only to one person, but to a number of different people. Some people can do it instinctively but others need to work at it. It's not simply a question of introducing yourself and saying this is what I do for a living and this is what I can do for you. As far as I'm concerned, if you present yourself as listening intently to someone it can make the world of difference. It's not so much how you communicate yourself that's important as how you help others communicate with you. It means asking questions – having questions in mind which you can ask really helps to stop the conversation from drying up. It also means listening to their answers, not just superficially. You need to be intent and show how interested you are. That's what really gets the conversation going and that's how relationship building begins, especially when you are networking with total strangers.

1. Try to define 'networking' in your own words.
2. Patrick mentions 3 things which makes someone a good networker. Can you identify them?

5 top tips to help you keep conversations going

1. Think of questions which you can use to begin a conversation. A good way to start is with a fairly general question. For example, if you are at a conference, you might ask one of the other delegates 'Have you been to one of these conferences before?'
2. Respond to an answer with a more detailed question. This can help to show you are interested in the speaker. For example, if the person says 'I'm a teacher', you could ask 'Where do you teach?'
3. To broaden the conversation, you could ask questions about the speaker's past (e.g. How long have you been teaching?) or opinions about their job (e.g. What do you enjoy about your job?).
4. Try to make sure that you ask *open* questions – that is, questions which allow the speaker to give lots of information. Try to avoid questions which only need a 'yes' or 'no' answer.
5. Show you are interested. As Patrick says, it is important to listen and respond. In British English, you can often hear listeners use the word 'Really?' to show that they are interested and to encourage the speaker to say more.

TASK Listen out for the language of discussions

Look at your BBC World Service programme schedule and choose a discussion programme on a topic which interests you. Listen to the discussion and make notes on the language the presenter uses to keep the discussion or interview going. In particular, listen to the language he or she uses to show their interest in what the speaker says. If possible, ask a friend to listen with you. Make some notes about what is said while you are listening, then, when the programme has finished, compare your notes with your friend.

6 Changing your pronunciation

Pronunciation is one area which nearly all learners of English agree is problematic. Many say that, although their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is good, they feel shy when speaking because sometimes listeners don't understand them. So how do you go about changing your pronunciation?

In this extract from **English Makeover**, Karen Adams gives advice to Eun, a student from Korea, on making changes to her pronunciation.

Before you read the extract Think about your own pronunciation in English. Are there any words which you find difficult to say? Write them down. Can you work out why you find them difficult?

*I don't think I've met any learners of English who are truly happy with their pronunciation. In part, this is because many of us **aspire** to sound like native speakers when we are learning a new language. And that, I'm afraid, is a very difficult thing to achieve because, unlike grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation isn't something which is very easy to study. Not everyone can hear – let alone reproduce – the combination of sounds which make up the language they are learning. However, it is possible to make some adjustments to your pronunciation so that people understand you when you speak. One technique for this is known as 'voice setting'. Basically, you need to forget about you learning English and think instead about a British or American person learning your language. How would they sound? Try saying 'Hello, how are you?' in your own language, but in the way an English-speaker would say it. Say it out loud. Think about how your mouth feels when you are imitating this English-speaker – for example, are your lips more rounded or wider than when you speak normally? By imitating an English-speaker speaking your language, you are automatically making the shapes which you need to make for English pronunciation. Now try saying something in English in this way. It's only one technique, and it may sound funny – but it really can work!*

1. Why is it difficult for learners of a language to sound like native speakers?
2. Imagine a friend has asked you to describe 'voice setting' to them. Try to describe this technique in your own words.

5 top tips for changing your pronunciation

1. Try voice-setting. Imitating an English speaker speaking your language is one way to find out how your mouth needs to be shaped to produce English sounds.
2. Identify your own problem sounds. By recognising which sounds or combination of sounds are difficult for you, you can begin to work on them. For example, many learners in China may have difficulty with the sounds /l/ and /r/ so cannot **differentiate between** the words *light* and *right*. If this is a problem for you, try rounding your lips when you say *right*. This will get you closer to the /r/ sound.
3. Make sure you identify the stress when you learn new words. In words with two or more syllables, you need to identify which syllable is stressed (e.g. SYLL-a-ble). Putting the stress in the wrong place can make it difficult to understand what is being said.
4. Don't confuse fluency with speed. Some learners feel that, if they speak quickly, they will sound more fluent. But be careful – if you speak too quickly, the listener may not understand you. Try to slow down and stress the important words in your message.
5. Set achievable goals. When you are setting your own learning goals (see *Getting out of a learning rut*, page 1), think carefully about how you want to change your pronunciation. Remember, aiming to sound like a native speaker is a very ambitious – and, for most of us, not very realistic – goal. However, speaking so the listener understands what you say is important. Try to identify any aspects of your pronunciation which get in the way of understanding, and work on those first.

TASK

- Go back to the words you wrote down before you read the extract. Can you identify why they are difficult for you? For example, it may be that there is a group of sounds which you can say individually, but cause problems when they appear together.
- Now think of a conversation you have had in English. Identify any pronunciation problems which you had. For example, did the person listening to you understand you? If not, what was difficult for them to understand.
- Once you have identified your main problem areas, think about how you might address them. For example, perhaps you could ask someone you know who speaks English to help you.
- Write out one pronunciation goal for the next month. For example, this could be to improve your pronunciation of your 'difficult words' or it could be to try the voice setting exercise explained in the extract.
- Try to record yourself speaking now. Keep this tape, then record yourself at the end of the month. Can you hear some improvement?

7 Improving your spelling

English spelling is a **notoriously** difficult area, even for native speakers. There seem to be no clear rules governing how words are spelt, and many different combinations of letters which represent the same sound.

Johnnie from Portugal is a learner of English featured in **English Makeover**. In this extract from the programme, Karen Adams give him advice on how to improve his spelling.

Before you read the extract Think of 3 words which you know cause spelling problems for you. Write them down. Is the spelling correct?

*Spelling. It can be a huge problem and I'm not surprised that Johnnie finds it difficult – even I do sometimes! I think there are three main problems for learners. First of all, unlike many languages, English spelling isn't phonetic – that is, there isn't always a direct link between how a word is spelt and how it sounds. Secondly, because English has borrowed words from all over the place – French, Latin, Greek to name but a few, English words often retain the spelling of the original language so it's like a **patchwork** of different spelling rules. And finally, part of the joy of English is that it is changing so rapidly, absorbing new words or changing as new generations and cultures take it on. So you end up with changes in spelling. For example, some people write 'spelt' and some 'spelled'. And both are ok. However, there are some things which you can do to help improve your spelling. First of all, learn some common patterns. One which people in the UK learn is 'i before e, except after c.' Then look for your own patterns to help you remember spelling. And finally, try to make up your own **mnemonics** – to help you remember spelling. I always used to confuse **stationary** and **stationery** – one is an adjective which means 'standing still' and one is a noun for paper, pencils, etc. Then I realised – **stationery** is linked to **paper**. It's my own mnemonic.*

1. Find 3 reasons why English spelling causes problems for learners.
2. Find 2 things you can do to help improve your own spelling.

5 top tips for improving your spelling

1. Learn some common spelling patterns. For example, when you have a combination of 'i' and 'e', it will usually be 'ie' (e.g. friend) except when a 'c' goes before it (e.g. receipt). However, like all English 'rules', this is **usually** – not always – the case.
2. Learn to recognise common sound/spelling links. For example, the sound /Σ↔v/ often comes at the end of words and is often spelt **-tion** (e.g. education; election).
3. Spell by syllables. Try to break a long word into its individual syllables and say these when you need to write the word down. For example, should you write *independent* or *independant*? Try syllable spelling – *in-dep-en-dent*.
4. Make your own mnemonic. When you learn a word which you find, try to make a link between the spelling and a different idea. For example, Karen found the words **stationary** and **stationery** difficult to remember. We often say the phrase **stationary train** – Karen remembers the spelling by remembering that both words have an 'a' – **stationary train**.
5. Test yourself. When you are revising new vocabulary, don't just check that you understand the meaning. Try to write down the new word before checking with your notebook or dictionary.

TASK Make your own mnemonic

A mnemonic is something which you know will help you remember a piece of information. For example, when you need to remember the spelling of a word, think of the mnemonic and this will **jog your memory**.

Go back to the words which you wrote down before you read the extract. These should be words which you know you find difficult to spell. Try to create a mnemonic for the spelling of each word.

8 Upgrading your emails

In many offices around the world, email has now replaced letters and faxes as the most commonly-used form of written communication. It is quick and informal, and grammar and spelling are often not as important as in more formal documents. However, because there are fewer 'rules', it can be difficult to know if what we are writing is appropriate to the situation.

In this extract from **Working English Magazine**, Hamish Norbrook talks about things you should think about if you use email in your work.

Before you read the extract Imagine you have to send some information (in English) in an email to your boss. Try to think of 3 'rules' which you could use to make sure that the tone of your email is appropriate and that the information is clear.

Some people use emails exactly the same way as letters, so they can be very formal. In other cases, things can get very informal. That's great if you really understand informal English, but it can be a real pitfall if you don't. Every now and then, you can send something back which appears to be really nice and informal – for example, you just say 'Yes' instead of 'Yes, I can' – but the other person may not read it as being informal. They may just read it as being a bit abrupt and rude. This sort of thing can be very difficult. Another point to remember is that it's important to keep things simple and short because reading on screen is more difficult than reading print on a piece of paper. Also, if you want someone to do something, it's handy to put things in bullet points. So, for example, you could say 'Could you please confirm that you will – bullet point, bullet point, bullet point'. This makes it easier for the reader to identify what they have to do.

1. According to Hamish, why is writing an email in informal English difficult?
2. What 2 pieces of advice does Hamish give to people who are writing work emails? Are they the same as your own 'rules'?

5 top tips for effective emails in English

If you don't know the person you are writing to very well...

1. Think of an appropriate greeting. You could use 'Dear...' or, if you want to be more informal, try 'Hello...'. When you finish the message, 'Regards' or 'Best wishes' are friendly and polite ways to close.
2. Think 'informal but polite': The language of email is a cross between writing and speaking. If you would say 'please' or 'thank you' in this situation, don't forget to write it.
3. Be careful with punctuation. Exclamation marks (!) and words written in capital letters can make your message seem rude or aggressive. If you want to draw the reader's attention to something, or to show that something is urgent, write **Urgent** in the subject box, and use **bold** typeface to highlight what is important.
4. Organise your information clearly. Using bullet-pointed lists with clear headings will make your message easier to read.
5. Try to avoid very informal language until you know the reader better. Remember, an effective message is one which your reader can interpret easily. Using informal language can make your ideas and intentions more difficult to understand.

TASK Upgrade the email

Look at the email below. Can you improve it by using the guidelines above?

To: tim@goodenglishbooks.com
From: billm@webenglishschool
Subject: books

TIM!

Got yr name from yr company's website. I NEED TO ORDER BOOKS FOR MY STUDENTS (I'm a teacher with a class of 20 students). ASAP!!! Send 20 Level 1 textbooks, 20 dictionaries and a teacher's reference book. Also, can I have 20 assorted readers for Level 1 sts? Send the invoice to my email address.

Thanx

Bill Murray

Answer key

① Getting out of a learning rut

1. It is difficult because learners can usually express their ideas adequately. Therefore, it is difficult to find a *need* to learn more.
2. Try to find opportunities to use English in different ways. You can do this by meeting new people or taking up a new interest.

② Widening your vocabulary

1. Your active vocabulary includes the words and phrases you can actively use in conversation or in writing. Very often, students don't think about how useful a word is before they make a note of it so many new words don't become active.
2. Think carefully before you write down a new word. Ask yourself 'Why do I want to learn this word?'
Limit the new words you want to learn to 4 or 5 at one time. Trying to learn too many will make it difficult to remember them.

③ Giving yourself time to think in conversations

1. Learners often panic when they are asked a question in conversation, so they can't think of what to say. This can affect their confidence.
2. Use 'thinking noises' like 'ermm'; use 'thinking phrases' such as 'let me think'; repeat part of the question.

④ Changing the tone of what you say

1. *native speakers tend to use rather indirect language. British people, in particular, will use eight words where perhaps four might have been enough.*
 - *tend* to shows that you want to avoid saying 'all people do this all the time'.
 - *rather*, like *quite*, is a word which can change the strength of the adjective. Both words can be used to mean 'very' **and** 'not very'.
 - *perhaps*, like *could* and *might*, can be used to make opinions sound less direct.

⑤ Keeping the conversation going

1. See the definition in the glossary.
2. A good networker asks questions, listens attentively to the answers and responds to the speaker.

⑥ Changing your pronunciation

1. It is not easy to study pronunciation. Not everyone can make out the different sounds of the language they want to learn.
2. Try to imitate an English speaker speaking your language.
 - Say 'Hello, how are you?' in your own language, but as if an English speaker were saying it. (You must speak out loud!)
 - While you are saying this, notice the shape of your mouth. Are your lips more rounded than in your own language? Does the sound seem to come from a different part of your mouth?
 - Try to keep your mouth in this position when speaking English. Listen to hear the difference in your pronunciation.

⑦ Improving your spelling

1. English words are not always spelt the way they sound; English contains words from many different languages; English is changing because it is being used in so many different countries, so spelling is changing too.
2. Learn common spelling patterns; make your own mnemonics.

⑧ Upgrading your emails

1. It is very easy for a reader to interpret informal English as being abrupt or rude.
2. Keep messages simple and short; use bullet pointed lists to make information easier to read.

To: tim@goodenglishbooks.com

From: billm@webenglishschool

Subject: Urgent – Book Order: As soon as possible

Dear Tim

I am a teacher at the Web English School and I'd like to order some books for my class of English students.

Could you send me:

- 20 Level 1 textbooks
- 1 teacher's reference book
- 20 dictionaries
- 20 assorted readers for Level 1 students

My address is:

Web English School, 20 High Street, London NE18

Please send the invoice to me via email.

Thank you.

Regards

Bill Murray

Glossary

Introduction

stimulating (adjective)

if a subject is stimulating, it catches your interest and makes you think.

to give _____ a boost (verb)

when we give someone a boost, you do something to make them feel happier or more confident. When you give something a boost, you improve it very quickly. We often say 'It gave my confidence a boost'.

Getting out of a learning rut

to be in a rut (verb)

if you are in a rut, you have been doing the same activity for a long time and now you are bored. You need to make changes to improve the situation.

plateau (noun)

a time of little or no change following a period of progress

register (noun)

when we speak, we use different words and often different grammar for different situations. We may use slang words with friends but very 'correct' language at work. These are examples of two different registers.

to revitalise (verb)

to make something new again

Widening your vocabulary

synonym (noun)

when two words are synonyms, they express the same idea (e.g. ship/boat). Be careful, however – two words rarely mean exactly the same thing. There are usually some fine differences of meaning.

Giving yourself time to think in conversations

fluently (adverb)

if you speak or write English fluently, you do it easily and without mistakes.

to panic (verb)

to become confused because you are afraid

strategy (noun)

a plan to help get round a problem

chunk (noun)

a language chunk is a group of words (or phrase) which together form a unit of meaning (e.g. 'Would you like a...') is used to make offers)

to clarify (verb)

to make something clear

to paraphrase (verb)

to say the same thing, but using different words

Changing the tone of what you say

to make allowances for (someone/something)

to understand or tolerate someone or something even if this creates a problem

to get to grips with (something) (verb)

to fully understand a skill or piece of information so that you can use it

vague (adjective; /veɪg/)

unclear. Often used when talking about language, thoughts and ideas.

Keeping the conversation going

to chat (verb)

to have a conversation, usually with friends

to network (verb)

to meet and chat with new people who are in the same business as you, usually in a social setting. When you network, you usually hope to form a business relationship with the people you meet.

instinctively (adverb)

if you do something instinctively, you know what to do without thinking about it.

delegate (noun)

a person attending a business conference

Changing your pronunciation

to aspire to (something) (verb)

to have a very strong ambition to do (something)

to make out (something) (verb)

to understand when you hear something

to differentiate (between) (verb)

to recognise the difference between two things

Improving your spelling

notorious (adjective)

if something is notorious, it is well-known – but for a bad reason

patchwork (noun)

usually used to describe a bedcover made of many different pieces of different-coloured cloth. Here, it describes the different languages which have been used to 'make' English.

mnemonic (noun; /nɛmɒnɪk/)

something which you use to aid your memory of a word or idea

to jog your memory (verb)

to make you remember something

Upgrading your emails

pitfall (noun)

a pitfall is a problem which you didn't expect to have

handy (adjective; informal)

useful