

Native Intonation

How to Actually Sound Like a Native Speaker

What Your English Teacher Didn't Tell You



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Introduction

Are you an English language learner? Do you often get frustrated because no matter how much you try, you just don't sound like a native speaker? Do you find it annoying when people ask you where you're from, because of your accent?

If you feel that way, don't be too hard on yourself. It's not your fault. Your teachers at school might have taught you how to memorize English words or score high on tests. But perhaps, they didn't train you to speak English like a native speaker.

Then what can you do to start sounding like a native speaker? In this little book, we'll explore why you cannot speak as well as you read, and what you can do to start sounding like a native speaker.

There are two things to keep in mind. One: use the same words and expressions native speakers use. There are **phrasal verbs**, **collocations**, and **idioms**, which seem deceptively simple, but can cause some confusion for English learners. Two: use your mouth, lips, and jaw the same way native speakers do when speaking English. That means, you're going to learn about the mechanics of pronunciation and features of English speech, such as **word and sentence stress**, **intonation** and **connected speech**.

Are you ready? Let's find out how you can sound more like a native speaker. Let's get started!

Why Can't I Speak Like a Native Speaker?

You might be wondering, “Why can't I speak like a native speaker?” One reason for this is **word choice**. Native English speakers have an enormous selection of words to choose from to describe exactly how they're feeling.

And it's not just that native speakers know more words. They know **different combinations** of words and how to use them. What are those combinations?

Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs are word combinations that are made up of a verb and a preposition, or a verb and an adverb. They're commonly used by native speakers. However, they can be confusing. You might know the meaning of a verb and a preposition individually. But when they're put together as a phrasal verb, it can mean something different.

For example, there's the verb “*put*” and the preposition “*up*.” When you put them together you get “*put up*.” What does “*put up*” mean? It means to hang. You could hang a picture on the wall. Or you could *put up a picture* on the wall.

Additionally, many phrasal verbs have more than one meaning. “Put up” can also mean to display, nominate, build, or increase. Try adding the preposition, “with” and you get, “*put up with*.” To “put up with something” means to cope with something.

And then you have phrasal verbs with the same verb but with hugely different meanings. “*Up*” and “*down*” are opposites.

But “put up” and “put down” aren’t opposites. They actually have nothing to do with each other! To “put down a box” means to place or drop the box on the table or on the floor. To “**put somebody down**” means to make them feel bad.

As you can see, knowing these phrasal verbs can unlock a whole world of many different meanings. If you’ve been struggling to come up with different ways to express something, learn to use phrasal verbs.

Collocations

As well as phrasal verbs, there are collocations. Collocations are words which usually go together. There’s no strict pattern or rule to collocations.

For example, you can say, “**play** tennis.” But native speakers usually don’t say, “**perform** tennis.” You can say, “**do** yoga.” But we usually don’t say, “*play yoga*.” How about, “*make the bed*”? “Make the bed” means to place the pillow and the blanket nicely on the bed. “Make the bed” doesn’t involve woodworking! And we don’t say, “*do the bed*” or “*tidy the bed*.” We always say, “*make the bed*” because that is the usual word combination which means to make the bed look nice.

You can still be understood even if you use the wrong collocation. But that’s when people will notice that you might not be a native speaker.

Idioms

Native English speakers often use idioms to make their speech more interesting. Instead of, “*she’s annoying*,” you might hear, “*she gets on my nerves*.” Or “*she drives me up the wall*.”

Do you know the idiom for “good luck”? It’s “*break a leg*!” Isn’t it funny? Idioms can be difficult because they’re not clear what

they mean from the words they contain. And like collocations, the wording is fixed. There aren't other alternative word combinations.

So, if you want to wish someone good luck, make sure to say, "*break a leg!*" Be careful not to say, "*break **your** leg!*" If you say, "*break your leg!*" you're definitely not wishing someone good luck.

This is why sometimes English learners feel like they already know a lot of advanced vocabulary, but don't know how to use simple words. It's not just simple words, but the certain combinations of simple words that make your English speech rich and interesting.

Why English Doesn't Sound Like The Way it Looks

English doesn't always have consistent spelling patterns. Some words might have a similar spelling but are pronounced differently. This is because English is influenced by many different languages, such as Nordic, German, Latin, Greek and French.

For example, let's look at the word, "tough." T-O-U-G-H. "GH" is pronounced "f" in tough. How about "though"? T-H-O-U-G-H. "Gh" is silent in the word, "*though*."

W-E-A-R and *W-H-E-R-E* sound the same but the vowels are written differently. Then take *W-E-A-R* and *E-A-R*. The vowels are spelled the same way, but wear and ear are produced differently.

When children are exposed to the English language at an early age, they become familiar to all the different English sounds. But some native speakers make pronunciation and spelling mistakes too, especially with words they've never seen or spoken before.

Compare that to a language like Spanish. As long as you understand the basic patterns, most people will be able to look at a Spanish word and read it correctly.

There are some patterns to the spelling and sound of an English word, which are often derivatives of the language of its origin.

It's not necessary to be able to look at a word and identify whether an English word came from Greek or Latin. The study of the origin of words is called etymology. Etymology helps in some areas, but it certainly is not a requirement to be a fluent English speaker.

When you expose yourself to English on a regular basis, you will subconsciously be able to identify and associate certain spelling patterns with their sounds.

My Grammar is Fine... But Why Don't I Sound Smooth Like a Native Speaker?

Your grammar is fine. But are you frustrated because your speaking doesn't sound as smooth as a native speaker? The particular way you speak, usually based on where you are from, is called an **accent**. English accents vary widely. The British accent is different from the American English accent. The Canadian accent is similar to the American accent, but there are still differences. Even within the same English-speaking country, accents vary depending on the region.

Changing your accent can definitely be a step closer to sounding more like a native speaker. Here's an interesting fact about accent. Anyone can change their accent regardless of their actual English levels. Did that surprise you? Let me say that again. You can change your accent regardless of your actual English level. Why is that? That is because changing your accent has a lot more to do with learning to shape and use your mouth, tongue and jaw.

You also need to practice copying sounds. Actors are famously good at mimicking. Frequently, you'll have an actor from the U.S. playing a British role with a British accent. They will have spent a lot of time listening to British English and copying the sounds that have been made. It's not just about the sounds but also the rhythm and intonation of your speech. Again, this requires deliberate practice and we'll have a look at this in more detail further on.

While it'll take time to improve your use of different phrasal verbs, collocations and idioms to help you speak like a native speaker, your accent is something that you can work on regardless of your level.

Should I Try to Change My Accent?

Having a foreign accent doesn't always mean bad. People can understand you, even with a little foreign accent. It just means that they know that you're not local to the area. Some consider foreign accents to be charming, unique and a part of your personality. Unfortunately, some people might also consider a foreign accent to be a negative thing. A lot of historical prejudices and stereotypes are still around today.

You might want to change your accent so that you blend in, and you want to be considered local. Or perhaps, you want to sound professional at work, and you don't want people around to make assumptions about you based on the way you sound. If anything you'd rather have them think that you're smart! It's totally fine to feel that way. There's no shame in that. If you want to change the way you speak you can. You just need to know the concepts to train your speaking skills right.

What if you have a perfect, near-native accent but your grammar and vocabulary are bad? Because of your accent, people might think you're a native speaker. But if you use wrong words and bad grammar, they might perceive you as rude or not so intelligent!

You don't need to have a native speaker accent in order to communicate effectively. But you can learn to reduce how strong your accent is. Do you want to change your accent? You probably need to relearn how to make sounds with your mouth. And the sounds can be broken down into the mechanics of **pronunciation**, **word and sentence stress**, **intonation** and **connected speech**.

Pronunciation

As a non-native English speaker, you might transfer some particular pronunciation features of your first language into English.

For example, Japanese speakers typically find it difficult to differentiate between the *r* sound and the *l* sound. Spanish speakers might have trouble with the *b* sound, and the *v* sound.

Korean speakers might have problems with the *f* sound, and mistakenly pronounce *f* as *p*. Polish speakers often find the *th* sound difficult.

We rarely stop and think how we're using our mouth to produce sound. When we learn a language for the first time, we just mimic people around us and do our best to say the same words they're saying. Then we develop and reinforce particular mouth movements and placements so that we can reliably produce the sound in our first language.

Is it too late for an adult to improve his or her pronunciation? Not at all. It just means, the way you learn English pronunciation as an adult would be different from that of a child. You have to undo the pronunciation habits of your first language, and deliberately learn to pronounce English words at a near-native fluency.

Try saying this sentence out loud. "*The sky is blue.*" Say each word slowly and clearly. Notice what's happening to your mouth and your tongue. What shape are your lips making? Where is your tongue placed? How open or closed is your jaw?

This is the mechanics of pronunciation. **The way your mouth, tongue and jaw are positioned** changes the sound you make.

Here's what might be happening to your mouth, when you say the sentence, "*The sky is blue.*"

Your lips start to open, and relaxed for "*the,*" and then widen for "*sky.*" They relax again for "*is.*" When you say, "*blue,*" your upper lip and lower lip touch for the *b* sound and then they make a round shape at the end of the word, "*blue.*"

Now, say the same sentence and notice your tongue placement. “The sky is blue.” The tip of your tongue starts between your teeth to pronounce “the,” then moves to just behind your front teeth as you breathe out. When pronouncing / in “*blue*,” your tongue quickly taps the area of gum behind your upper front teeth. This is called the alveolar ridge.

Vowels

In English, we have five vowel letters - *a, e, i, o, u*. So you might think there are five vowel sounds in English. Wrong! These five letters are used to express the vowels. But there are actually more than 20 vowel sounds in English.

Vowel sounds are made without any restriction to the airflow. That means, your lips or your tongue don’t block the air like consonants do. You could keep making the sound until you run out of air. For example, see how long you can say the word eye. “Eye~~~~.” That’s right, you can keep going until you run out of breath! This is because it’s a vowel sound. Different vowel sounds are made by changing the shape of your lips, and how open your jaw is.

One way we can change our mouth shape is making it wider or narrower. Say, beep, bit, book, boot. When native speakers say these words, their mouth starts wide, and gradually narrows as they say the words. “*Beep, bit, book, boot.*”

Another way we can change our mouth shape is by opening our jaw. Compare book, bird, and bar. When native speakers say these words, their jaws drop and open more as they say the words. “*Book, bird, and bar.*”

Consonants

Now, let's have a look at the consonant sounds. Unlike vowels, consonant sounds come to an eventual stop. You use vocal organs like tongue, lips, teeth, and vocal cords and the consonant sounds are made when they touch with one another.

Say the word, "bee." In order to pronounce the "b" sound, you close your mouth so that the upper and lower lips are shut. Then you force the air out between your lips.

How about this word, "key"? In order to pronounce the "k" sound, the back of your tongue pulls back and blocks the airflow in your throat. Then you force the air out between the back of your tongue and the soft area of the roof your mouth, which is also called the soft palate.

There are also voiced and unvoiced sounds. Put your fingers on your throat and make the "zzz" sound like a bee. You should feel vibrations, because "z" is a voiced sound. Now, make the hissing sound like a snake, "sss." You won't feel any vibration in your throat because it's an unvoiced sound.

So there you have a brief introduction to the mechanics of pronunciation. When you become aware of how your mouth, tongue and jaw are moving when you speak, it'll help you improve your pronunciation. If you need more help with pronunciation, we have a [training program](#) for you which you can check out later.

Stresses in a Language

A unit of sound that has one vowel is called a “syllable.”

For example, the word “banana” has three syllables because there are three vowels, each attached with one consonant.

Pop quiz. Which syllable is stressed in the word, “banana”? Is it:

“**B**anana,”

“Ba**n**ana,”

Or, “bana**n**a.”

Is it first, second or third? Where do you put the emphasis? Answer: It’s the second syllable. “Ba**n**ana.” The second syllable sounds louder, longer, and higher in tone. Stressing the first or third syllable would sound a bit funny.

We call this type of stress within a word, “**word stress**.”

Word Stress

In some languages, there are regular word stress patterns. In Czech, the stress is always on the first syllable. In Polish, it’s often on the second to the last syllable. In English, there are some word stress patterns. But there are also many exceptions.

People can tell that you’re not a native English speaker by the way you stress your words. If you stress words at unusual places, people will perceive you as having a unique accent.

Do you ever find it hard to hear and understand native speakers, even when they're speaking easy words? One of the reasons is because you're not accustomed to the native accent. That is why being aware of word stress is important.

There are always exceptions, but one consistent pattern in English is that, in two-syllable nouns and adjectives, the word stress usually falls on the first syllable. For example, “apple and “window.” “Lovely” and “greatly.”

Some words can be a noun or verb depending on where you put the emphasis. For example, in a two-syllable noun, the emphasis on the first syllable. In a two-word verb, the emphasis on the second syllable. A “record” is a noun. “To record” is a verb. “Progress” is a noun. “Progress” is a verb.

Here's a quick tip. In dictionaries, you'll find the stressed syllable marked with an apostrophe before it. An apostrophe is a little tick symbol placed at the top of a letter. For example, you might find an apostrophe before the letter “a” in the word, “apple” in a dictionary, because the emphasis is on the first syllable.

‘apple.

Sentence Stress

Sentence stress is a manner in which stresses are distributed on the words of a sentence. In a sentence, stressed words are louder, longer, and different in tone than the other words.

We'll call the words that are emphasized in a sentence as, “sentence stress.”

The words that are emphasized in a sentence are usually important words. They carry the main meaning. Words like, and, is, he, she, it, are usually spoken quickly and quietly, because they usually are not very important words in a sentence.

Changing the sentence stress changes the way your message is perceived by the listener. Sentence stress can be used to indicate your feelings about what you're saying.

Listen to these sentences and hear how the difference in the emphasis can carry different feelings.

- One. **I** can't believe she said that
- Two. I **can't believe** she said that
- Three. I can't believe **she** said that
- Four. I can't believe she **said** that
- Five. I can't believe she said **that**

I'll say it one more time, with an interpretation of what each sentence means.

- One. **I** can't believe she said that = Not you, him or her, but me! I am really surprised.
- Two. I **can't believe** she said that = I'm so surprised that I almost wish what I heard wasn't true!
- Three. I can't believe **she** said that = I'm surprised that she said that! That's unlike her to say something like that.
- Four. I can't believe she **said** that = Not whispered or thought about it, but she vocalized and made it heard. That is why I'm surprised.
- Five. I can't believe she said **that** = I'm surprised by the content of what she said.

Both word stress and sentence stress are important to help people understand your intent and emotion.

Intonation

In order to understand intonation, we need to understand pitch. Pitch is when a sound is high or low. Like on a piano keyboard, the keys to the left are lower in pitch and the keys to the right are higher.

Intonation is the rise and fall of pitch in a sentence. Native English speakers vary their intonation a lot when speaking. Whereas beginner English learners often don't have as much intonation in their speaking.

Have you tried imitating native speakers? Did your teacher tell you to exaggerate in your speech? Was it difficult, embarrassing, or uncomfortable?

Here's what happened to one of our students who tried to exaggerate his intonation when speaking in English. He thought he was going overboard and doing too much. But to his English teacher, he sounded just about normal.

Your intonation, or lack of, might also have to do with your first language. Perhaps, it might not so polite or common to go up and down in pitch and vary the intonation when speaking in your first language. And you might be using that same intonation style in English.

Native speakers really notice when there's lack of intonation. When your voice is too flat, people may think that you're bored or being sarcastic. That is why sometimes, non-native English speakers come across as "rude" or "unfriendly" in English-speaking countries. Lack of intonation, combined with word and sentence stresses at wrong places, can give off a false impression about you.

Here are some examples where intonation has to change in order to carry the meaning.

When a question requires a yes or no answer, the intonation rises at the end of the question. Questions that start with “Be” or “Do” verbs follow this pattern.

Is it hot today?

Are you hungry?

Do you like Tom?

Does she not know who Tom is?

If we’re asking an open question, a question that starts with “what,” “why,” “when,” “who,” “how”, then the intonation usually falls.

What time is it?

Why are you not doing that?

When is the concert starting?

Who are these participants?

How many apples are there?

We also use intonation to show our emotions. If you’re excited, then you’ll probably have a rising intonation. If you’re being sarcastic, you might sound flat. This is why intonation is really in English communication. It’s not just what you say, but also how you say it.

So how would you go about learning intonation? Starting from today, try to notice and be aware of changes in pitch. Then, try to mimic those pitch changes when you speak out loud. If you naturally lack intonation, exaggerate when practicing. That way, when you’re having a normal conversation, it’ll even out and you’ll sound more natural.

Do you want to have a fun, engaging conversation in English, and make your friends feel great being around you? Intonation will help you with that. By practicing intonation, you will sound less robotic and more engaging.

If you'd like to practice intonation and get professional feedback without feeling embarrassed, make sure to check out our [training program](#).

Connected speech

Connected speech is another way to improve your flow and help you sound less robotic. When native speakers speak, they don't put a pause between each word. That would be so robotic!

Connected speech is when the sounds at the end of a word and the beginning of the next word blend together. By blending sounds, native speakers can speak fast and easily.

Try saying these sentences fast.

More rice please.

More ice please.

If you did it right, they will sound almost the same. Why is that? That's because the "r" sound at the end of the word "more" flows straight into the next word, "ice." So "more rice" and "more ice," when spoken fast, sound almost the same.

Sometimes the sound changes. “*I had to do it*” is pronounced “*I hatta do it*.” Notice how the “d” sound in “had” is followed by the “t” sound in “to.” When these words combine, native speakers pronounce this “d” like “t.” So “I had to do it” becomes “I hatta do it.”

Sometimes, native speakers miss out sounds altogether. “Going to” is pronounced “*gonna*.” “Want to” is pronounced “*wanna*.” This is so common that people might think that *gonna* or *wanna* are words in a dictionary. They’re not.

You might wonder if there are rules to connected speech. There aren’t strict rules per se, but there are common patterns that native speakers adopt in their speeches to make speaking easier and faster.

Connected speech is one of the reasons why non-native speakers struggle to recognize the words they already know in a conversation.

Breathing

Another reason why you might sound robotic and not smooth in your speech is because you’re not breathing the same way native speakers are.

What? We’re talking about breathing. Does that sound weird to you? Again, just like with pronunciation or accent, if you don’t take the time to notice, you might never be aware of how you’re breathing when you’re speaking English.

Chances are, because you're not used to the native intonation and you're not speaking with connected speech like the natives do, you might be breaking you breathe at places where natives wouldn't. It's very subtle, but that could be the reason why you sound choppy or broken up when speaking in long sentences.

Imagine being an actor in a movie and say this line to show your anger towards someone.

"I can't believe you went out of your way to ruin the only chance they'll ever get in their lifetime!"

Did you do it? How many times did you pause to take a breath? Were you able to put sentence stresses? Did you vary your intonation?

Many native speakers wouldn't have a problem saying this long sentence in one breath and show emotion. This is because they had enough practice using their mouth, tongue and jaw to make all those sounds quickly. As a non-native speaker, it might not come as easily to you.

So, practice your pronunciation and accent. Get familiar with intonation and connected speech. Learn to breathe properly so that you can say long sentences quickly like a native speaker.

Next Step

In this book, you learned the reasons why you might not be speaking and sounding like a native speaker.

Maybe you need to learn and practice many **combinations of words** that native speakers use, such as phrasal verbs, collocations, and idioms.

Maybe you are not using your mouth to **produce the same sound** as native speakers do. Learn pronunciation and accent. Adopt new speaking habits that make you an amazing English speaker. Do you want to be able to speak and communicate in longer sentences? And express sophisticated thoughts and feelings? Then practice intonation, connected speech, and learn to breathe properly.

If you'd like to know where you should get started in your next English-speaking journey, [request a free pronunciation evaluation by clicking the link](#). We'll help you find out which area of speaking you should focus on next, so that you can become a confident, fluent English speaker.

Thank you for reading this little book! We hope this book helped you become more aware of the many parts that make up English speech, and how you could go about becoming a confident English speaker.

Native Intonation

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