

5 things you should know about spoken English

by dilano | Apr 12, 2014 | Smart Learning Strategies |

Have you ever written down (transcribed) a conversation between native or proficient speakers of English?

If you have, you will know that natural conversation is far more chaotic, far less structured than written text. It contains lots of reformulation, repetition, false starts, incomplete sentences, formulaic phrases, and unfinished questions.

Conversations are unpredictable. We don't have much time to think about what we are going to say next so most of us speak in a chaotic way. Thought and ideas are like butterflies that come into our mind. We do our best to catch them and transform them into words before they fly away.

When we speak, we constantly edit, reformulate and paraphrase what we have said to make sure our conversational partner is able to understand us.

When we speak, we generally do it in 'real-time', which means we are not always able to create grammatically perfect sentences.

When we have a conversation, we have to react in 'real-time' to our listener's verbal and non-verbal responses and utterances, which means we have to improvise.

In other words, speech is far more flexible than written communication and doesn't always follow the grammar rules you may learn in class.

So, here are some features of spoken English that may help you speak in a more natural and relaxed way in everyday conversations:

1. The historical present

When we tell a story or an anecdote about something that happened, we often start by using past tenses. When the listener is engaged and interested, we often switch to present tenses because this makes the story more lively, engaging and real to the listener.

The other day, I was walking to the station when I saw a huge black dog with enormous teeth. The dog started running towards me and I froze because I was so scared. Suddenly, the dog jumps and me and I manage to jump out of the way. But the dog grabs my coat in its teeth, I kick it with my left foot...

2. Discourse markers

Discourse markers are short words or phrases that connect ideas, indicate when somebody wants to start or end a speaking turn, check that the listener has understood, change the conversation or add something, show the listener how the speaker feels about something, and prepares the listener for what the speaker is about to say.

Common discourse markers in spoken English include: *you know, like, right, OK then, actually, basically, as I was saying, what I mean is...*

Listen carefully to fluent English speakers to identify which discourse markers they use. Try using them in your own speech.

3. Situational ellipsis

When proficient speakers of English have informal conversations, they often leave out certain grammatical words, particularly pronouns and auxiliary verbs.

B. No, staying at home. (No, I'm staying at home).


Ellipsis refers to omitting or leaving out certain words so we communicate quickly and economically, using only the words which we think are necessary to convey what we need to express.

If you have everyday conversations and speak in full sentences, you may sound


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too formal. However, if you have *formal conversations* and leave out too many pronouns and auxiliary verbs, you may sound too familiar and too informal.

Other grammar words (articles and prepositions) can also be omitted. Make sure you don't leave out content words (verbs, adjectives, nouns) though!

4. General extenders

We lead very busy lives and information is all around us. Maybe that is why young people, in particular, use general extenders in their everyday speech. These are words or phrases that are used when we want to refer to a set of items but don't want to list them all.

For example: *I went to the supermarket to buy bread and milk **and stuff**.*

Phrases such as something like that, and all that, and those sort of things, and everything, and 'stuff like that' are all general extenders.

Listeners don't always need to know the details so you don't have to list everything. If you do, you might find that you bore your conversational partners.

5. Hedging

We don't always want to give strong opinions about things. Sometimes we are not sure how we feel about something or we don't have a close relationship with the listener so don't feel comfortable expressing how we really feel. Sometimes, we don't want to give a 'black and white' response because we don't know the appropriate or correct response. This is called 'hedging'.

Hedging words include items such as:

may, might,could, quite, a bit, suppose, sort of, I guess, and not with an adjective.

What did you think of the meal?

It wasn't bad.

Are you going to the party tomorrow?

Well, I may go. I suppose it might be fun.

The speaker is not 100% committed to their opinion. This means that people are unlikely to criticise them later because they didn't express their views with complete certainty.

One of the reasons we criticise politicians is because they always speak with such certainty, even when they are wrong or the facts suggest otherwise!

So, get into the habit of listening to fluent speakers, notice how they express themselves. I'm sure you'll hear examples of these 5 features of natural spoken English all the time.

What other characteristics of natural conversation do we find in English?

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