

BBC Learning English - Questions and Answers

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Anna: And now a question from one of our regular listeners, Shazad Enam, and Shazad wants to know how to improve pronunciation and fluency. Is there any way of doing that easily? Well – is there, Martin?

Martin: Easily, I don't know. I think if there were easy ways to improve anything, we wouldn't be learning languages and listen to the radio. I don't think there are easy ways to learn languages – I don't think people who promise sudden 'quick fix' methods are to be believed. We learn slowly, and we learn by working hard.

As far as pronunciation is concerned, the most important thing is listening! And I think, often we try and pronounce things correctly before we can really hear what the differences are. How do we check out whether we're doing that? Well I think we need to record ourselves and we need to record what it is we're repeating and listening to. So, the most useful thing perhaps is to listen to the radio with a tape recorder, to record a little bit of the radio, and then to say it ourselves, and to compare how we've said it, with the way it was said on the radio, in the language we're learning.

It's a slow process. A lot of time we need to spend rehearsing and I remember when I was learning, for instance, French: hours and hours and hours as I was walking or cycling, or whatever – trying to produce those sounds, difficult sounds that I was learning. The more we do that, the more we pick up when we hear them. And of course the other thing about pronunciation is, as we improve our pronunciation, that also improves our comprehension. As we learn to make these distinctions between similar sounds, we start hearing them – and that makes understanding easier.

Anna: And then you can actually see the words in your head, can't you? *[overlap Martin: yes]* ...if you understand them *[yes]* ...and you hear them correctly *[yes]*, and obviously then you know what it is *[yeah]* you're listening to.

Martin: And one of the biggest problems in English is that the spelling gets in the way because there are so many ways of spelling the same sound, and because letters may be written and not pronounced, because letters may be written and pronounced in a very unexpected way. When we learn to read, that can interfere with our pronunciation, and can cause problems in itself.

Anna: Is there a difference in your view between pronunciation and fluency?

Martin: Oh yes, I think they're quite different. Pronunciation is getting the sounds right, and of course it's also getting the intonation and the rhythm right – it's not just individual sounds, it's pushing them all together.

Fluency perhaps overlaps there a little bit. Fluency is saying things easily. Being fluent is more a question of being confident in the vocabulary, and how to put the words together in the grammar – being confident in that - ...and just being confident in your ability to express yourself and having a go: it's those psychological factors much more than whether you can get your tongue around the individual sounds. In fact people whose pronunciation is poor, but who speak fluently and put it together and get it out reasonably quickly, are usually easier to understand than people who're taking a lot of trouble over their pronunciation and therefore are slowing themselves down, and speaking one word at a time.

Anna: So if you had one piece of advice to give to listeners, learners, what would it be about improving pronunciation and fluency?

Martin: About improving pronunciation and fluency, my one piece of advice is: when you're speaking, don't think about the individual sounds and getting those right. Think about groups of words, and think about meaningful groups of words, and getting those out as quickly and as smoothly as you can.

Anna: That's great – thanks very much for that piece of advice, Martin.