

Taking Your English to the Street:

Six Common Problems and What to Do About Them

By Jane Wangersky

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I once told my class they could improve their English quickly by using it outside the classroom. I said they should try to speak English on the street, in the stores, in the library, and in other public places. They told me that they tried to do this, but they often had problems. "People talk too fast!" they said. "Or they don't understand what we say. Some people don't pronounce English words very well themselves . . ." and so on. I wrote down all the problems they had with using English in

public places. Then we looked at each problem, and we all tried to think of ways to handle it. These are the ideas we had. They're not magic, but they may help you as you try to use your English outside class.

1. People talk too fast.

This is a problem for people learning almost any language. In English, it may be even worse. English speakers speed up unstressed syllables, or just don't say them. They don't know they do this. They just know it sounds wrong if they don't.

What to do:

- Just ask them to slow down. ("Could you slow down, please?") Most people don't realize how quickly they speak.
- Repeat the most important words: words that give information, like days, times, prices, and other numbers.
- If someone spells a word for you, repeat each letter as they

say it. This will probably make them slow down.

- Carry a small notebook and pen. Write down the information you get. When people see you writing, they will usually slow down.
- Listen to the radio, TV, and native speakers to get used to the sound of English being spoken quickly.

2. They use too many words we don't know.

- Again, just ask. ("What does _____ mean?")
- Try to guess the meaning from the context – the other words and how they're used. If someone says "He's _____ months old," the word in the blank will be a number, of

course. Most times it isn't this easy, but you get the idea!

--Read in English as much as you can. You'll learn to read new words, and later you may hear and recognize them.

3. Some people have accents.

-- Ask them to repeat words you don't understand. ("I'm sorry, what did you say?" or just "Pardon?")

-- Learn about the different accents that are common in your area. Try watching TV shows about ethnic communities. Remember, if there are many people in your area from other countries, you will have to learn to speak

English with them too, not just with native speakers.

4. Different people use different words for the same thing.

English often has more than one word with the same meaning. This is because English words come from several different languages, and because different regions have different names for common things.

What to do:

- When you look up a word in the dictionary, read the list of words with similar meanings. Try to remember that you may hear them instead of the first word.

- Get a thesaurus – a book listing groups of words with similar meanings.
- Ask people which words are used in your area. For example, “Do people here say ‘soda’ or ‘pop’?” (In some places, they call all soft drinks “Coke”!)

5. People don’t give simple answers.

Many people have trouble keeping their speech simple. They say extra words while they’re thinking about what to say next. They may use slang words you don’t know.

What to do:

Listen for the key words – the words that really tell you what you want to know.

For example, if you’re listening to directions, key words could be:

- left
- right
- first
- next to
- across the street

In other situations, key words could be numbers, names, or units of time. When you hear key words, repeat them. This may get the other person to slow down or make their speech simpler.

6. People often don't understand what we say.

This happens to everyone who tries a new language. It can be very annoying to speak the best you can and have someone just look at you, or ask what you meant.

What to do:

Add more words, one at a time. For example, a man once asked me for directions to a "cottage". I was confused because a cottage is a small house in the country, and we were in downtown Vancouver! Then he said, "Community cottage", and I understood he meant Vancouver Community College. So I was able to help him. If you have to, show them something in writing, like the

name of the place you're looking for.

Practice your pronunciation whenever you can. Listen to native speakers. Get tapes from the library. Read English books out loud to your children – they will often tell you if you make a mistake. Learn to sing English songs.

Start slowly, and remember most people want to help.