

Tips to Improve Intelligibility When Speaking English

Intelligibility: To be understood by your listener when communicating a message. The goal is to be intelligible, not to change an accent.

1. Be sure to use general good speaking habits (which are important in all languages), including:
 - Get your listener's attention, face your listener and look at your listener while speaking
 - Use an appropriate rate of speech (not too fast, not too slow)
 - Speak loud enough so your listener can hear you
 - Use gestures to support your message
2. Speak clearly using all sounds in words, including the endings of words. Omitting sounds can result in grammatical errors and change the meaning of what you are trying to say. (e.g., "s" in plurals, "ed" for regular past tense)

If a sound is difficult to say, it is better to substitute a sound than to omit a sound (e.g., toothbrush: "toofbrush" rather than "toobrush")

3. Pay attention where to place stress in words with more than one syllable.
 - Tomato: to-**ma**-to
 - Onion: **on**-ion
 - Vegetable: **veg**-ta-ble
 - Variety: va-**ri**-e-ty
 - Mountain: **moun**-tain
 - Certificate: cer-**ti**-fi-cate
4. Practice how to say tricky words that are not pronounced as they are spelled.
 - Examples include: mountain ("moun-tin"), vegetable, says ("sez"), certificate, clothes ("kloz"), Wednesday ("wens-day")
 - Learn when words have silent letters when written:
Silent k (e.g., knife, knee, know, knowledge, knock)
Silent g (gnaw, flight, sign)

5. When possible, use complete sentences so that your meaning will be understood, even if you are not pronouncing a word correctly. Using a complete sentence gives a context for what you are saying and helps you to be understood. (e.g., I bought soup for dinner. I bought soap for the bathroom.)
6. Practice pronouncing vowels and consonants correctly, especially when an error affects the meaning of the word.
 - “r” vs. “l” (rake-lake, rice-lice, fry-fly)
 - “th” vs. “t” (thick-tick) or “th” vs. “s” (thick-sick)
 - “v” vs. “b” (vote-boat, vest-best)
 - “ee” vs. “I” (seat-sit, feet-fit, sleep-slip, peel-pill)

Ways to practice consonants include:

- Touch your throat to feel the vibration for voiced sounds (e.g., v, z, d, b)
 - Use a mirror or “selfie” mode on a phone to see what your mouth is doing and the placement of your tongue when making sounds (e.g., f, v, p, th, l)
 - Use a piece of paper in front of your mouth to see the difference in airflow (e.g., “p” vs “b” or “t” vs “d”)
7. When your listener says, “What” or “Say that again,” consider the following:
 - Was I speaking too quickly?
 - Is my voice too quiet or soft?
 - Did I “swallow” sounds or syllables?
 - Are there different words I can use, instead of just repeating?
 - Did I use the difficult word in a sentence to give a context for my message?