

**Female Voice:** You are now listening to the IELTS podcast. Learn from tutors and ex-examiners who are masters of IELTS preparation. Your host, Ben Worthington.

**Karen:** Hi IELTS podcast listeners. My name is Karen. I produce a podcast called Slow American English. It helps learners of American English practice their pronunciation and listening skills.

**Ben:** Super, thank you very much for coming on the show today. So, Karen, can you tell us-- you're in Colorado. Is that right?

**Karen:** That's right, yes, by the Rocky Mountains.

**Ben:** Super, got you. How did you get into pronunciation?

**Karen:** Well, I've always been interested in languages even other ones besides English and I want to help people sound more natural with their English.

**Ben:** Excellent, excellent. Before, you were telling me that you used to be a tutor in Prague and in Germany. Is that right?

**Karen:** Well, yes. I was in Prague to get my CELTA qualifications and then I taught in a town in the Czech Republic called Liberec.

**Ben:** Liberec.

**Karen:** It's a small town in the north of the country and that was beautiful. It was my first experience teaching abroad and then later I was in Germany also teaching for German language school and now I do it all online via Skype.

**Ben:** Got you, got you. Is this where you learned your trade when you were in Prague and Germany or did you develop that later like your trade is in your pronunciation skills?

**Karen:** Well, it was all a process. It's been through all of those years and I hope it's gotten better as I've grown older with more experience.

**Ben:** Excellent. So, if a student wants to improve their pronunciation, what are some steps they can take to do this, to achieve this?

**Karen:** Well, the first thing to make English sound the most natural I think is the "th" sound. So, it's very important the placement of the tongue between the teeth, which is very uncomfortable for most people. If you stick your tongue out, which is kind of rude, but if you do it that way, then you'll say the "th" right. I think that's the most helpful thing to sound more natural.

The second tip I would say is listen to native speakers and try to imitate them. If you look in the mirror while you are speaking English, that helps a lot. It also helps with your confidence. If you know how you look when you are speaking English, somehow it gives you more confidence to speak it in real situations.

**Ben:** Interesting. I didn't know that. I didn't know that. In fact, just going back to the "th" sound, you reminded me, for some reason it just popped into my mind, but I remember when I was younger and I would pronounce it wrong. I would say Fursday, with the "f" sound and I always--

**Karen:** With an "f" sound.

**Ben:** Yes, and I always remember my dad saying "Thursday, Thursday" you know, like put in the tongue between the teeth and then pulling it back for that authentic "th" sound. So, yes, just for the listeners even native English speakers have to learn this when they're growing up.

**Karen:** That's right. Children also have a problem with that. Many times the students pronounce it as an "s" sound. So, it'll be more like Sursday. So, this in some situations it can mean a totally different word, so it's important to get the sound right.

**Ben:** Yes, yes, totally. How could a student improve their fluency? Does that come under your remit as well?

**Karen:** Yes, fluency I think I borrow a technique from a professor I had in college who taught French. She would give us drills and we would practice over and over the same line repeating the same line from the dialogue from the chapter in the book.

So, this is a really good tip to just perform drills like this. It's really amazing how much you can remember if you've repeated those lines over and over even if it's only five minutes a week.

**Ben:** This is a really good tip actually and I strongly agree with this. I know that I've got some of-- because as we were saying earlier, like I was talking I learned how to speak Spanish, but one of the methods I used was just to memorize phrases entirely.

You almost memorize it as though it's one word, but just a very long word and it just comes so-- it just sounds so much smoother especially if you are mimicking-- when you are doing the drill when you are mimicking an actual sort of like spoken English-- actual authentic material so you're getting the rhythm, the melody, and everything and then mimicking that sound. Yes, it's just one whole word and it makes you sound so much more fluent. Then because--

**Karen:** I agree.

**Ben:** --it's drilled in, you can start changing fragments of it and then before you know it, maybe you can-- I want to swim, for example, a very basic example. Then you can start changing it to I want to dance. I want to eat. Then-- so you're changing the final bit then maybe you can start changing the beginning. He wants to eat. He wants to swim. And so on and so forth. Of course, that was just a basic example, but--

**Karen:** Exactly, but that's absolutely right. It's almost like you can pretend to be an actor and act like someone who can speak English fluently. This helps you be more fluent because it seems to come a little more naturally if you're acting, which sounds like the opposite, but it does help.

**Ben:** Yes, yes. This reminds me of a book that's on my list which is called *Alter Ego* by Todd Herman and he goes into this much, much more detail about how he used to pretend that he was a 6-foot rugby player-- not rugby, American football player when really he was only like 5-foot tall.

So, he was quite small, but he used to pretend in his mind. He used to have this alter ego of a much bigger person so that when he went out and performed, that he was sort of like fulfilling this alter ego belief that he had and it helped him improve his game. There's no reason why it cannot be applied to your speaking abilities. That's a good tip.

**Karen:** Exactly. Yes and it's related to visualization.

**Ben:** Exactly.

**Karen:** So, if you know that you are going to speak English, visualize yourself before you go there that you're communicating effectively and speaking fluently and the other people can understand you. This goes a long way in creating that reality.

**Ben:** I'm glad you mentioned that because it's a known fact that a lot of professional athletes they all visualize the outcome before they get on the field, before they start their Olympic trials. All of them do this and there's no reason why an IELTS student cannot visualize the whole exam room and sitting there in front of the examiner, the examiner smiling.

If the student is speaking crystal clear, coherent English and you're confident and especially if you've been doing some exercises beforehand simulating this whole experience, it's only going to help you.

**Karen:** Correct. Correct. It works. It all leads to your confidence when you are speaking.

**Ben:** Exactly, this is a big issue. Do you find that's an issue with your students?

**Karen:** Yes, it's one of the first things that I work on with a student. I let them know that they are communicating with me even if it's not perfect English. Usually, this gives them the confidence to at least speak regularly and then we can work on what their problem areas are.

So, there's no way I can know what they need to work on without hearing them speak. So, if I encourage their confidence first, then I can help them with the problem areas, but I've had a lot of students tell me that they are more confident and even if they can't think of the word they

know they should know, if they find another way to say the same thing, it's just as good. It's just as fluent.

**Ben:** Yes, that's a good point there. It's much better just to find a different route to express the same meaning rather than stop, put the brakes on and stop everything while you're trying to think of that really-- that word you want or that construction you want.

Language doesn't work like that. Spoken English or any spoken language doesn't work like that. It's much more spontaneous and yes, the best thing is to go round that obstacle rather than just trying to keep pushing through it.

**Karen:** Exactly, right, right.

**Ben:** Yes, yes. So, with your students, could you give me an example of how a typical class might evolve when you're working on improving their pronunciation?

**Karen:** Well, most of my lessons are one-on-one these days on Skype. The first thing I start with is the "th" sound for sure because it is the biggest step and it does give them some confidence that they are speaking English correctly and that I can understand them.

So, then I find everyone has a different goal. Sometimes it's business English, sometimes it's medical, sometimes it's travel. For your students it would be the IELTS. Then I focus on the vocabulary that they need and there are certain things--

I teach mainly German speakers and there are some things that I can predict because many German speakers will have the same habits and Czech speakers will have different habits and Spanish speakers will have different habits.

So, I also talk to them to find out if they have the same English habits depending on their native language. Then I focus on those areas and teach them the English phrases and sentences to replace the one, maybe the bad habits that they've learned.

**Ben:** Got you, got you. Yes, when I taught in Spain, it was a very similar approach. Like first maybe we'd work on the pronunciation of the "h" because the Spaniards usually pronounce it "... " quite a guttural throat sound and then the constructions they use.

Instead of saying David's friend, they might say the friend of David, which we kind of understand, but it doesn't sound natural at all. I'm sure it's-- what kind of habits, bad habits might the German speakers have?

**Karen:** Well, as you said, the friend of mine instead of my friend, those possessive pronouns. That's the same area the "th" sound is a big problem for the German speakers because it's not part of the German language. Then the "j" in English, the "g" in English. The biggest problem between German speakers and learning English is that English is not phonetic. You can't predict the pronunciation based on strict rules and in German you can. So, I have to get them over expecting that to happen.

**Ben:** Got you. Yes, yes.

**Karen:** So, we have some guidelines, but we don't really have any rules. A third thing for German speakers, I think really any native speakers, the present continuous instead of the present simple. Whatever the usage of that is those rules can be very confusing as well.

**Ben:** Yes, yes. Just a few days ago, I was with a student online as well and we were going through a useful technique for the exam and I was asking a question in the present simple like do you swim? It's just a simple question like that, but she was replying in the present continuous which was okay, but ideally, I wanted to know sort of like in general like in the past did she swim or was she a bit of a swimmer, now was she swimming, in the future would she like-- ?

What's conveyed when we use the present simple and if we reply with a different tense, we're not really giving the answer that the listener wanted. Yes, just one way that I was sharing with her was like if she can just reflect the tense that she hears, you know, I think--

**Karen:** Absolutely.

**Ben:** --and you could also probably use this technique regarding pronunciation as well. You just reflect the sound while you are doing this.

**Karen:** Yes, and even vocabulary. You could use the same vocabulary as long as you understand it.

**Ben:** Yes, totally, totally.

**Karen:** But you're right. The verb tense conveys a lot of meaning in English that it's not clear in other languages especially our present perfect. It's even different between British and American English. So, that presents a real obstacle for non-native speakers.

**Ben:** Exactly, that's a good point. Do you have any tips for a student who might want to improve their pronunciation at home with the self-study?

**Karen:** Yes, I think listening to as much English as you can especially by native speakers. So, that can be movies, television, newscasts, my podcast, but that was-- when I was learning German, I found that there wasn't enough listening material that was slow enough for me to understand in the beginning.

So, that's why I started Slow American English because there wasn't anything in English either. So, if you have also a transcript for the recording that you're listening to, when you read it as you listen can be very helpful.

**Ben:** Yes, that's so true. I remember actually when I was learning Spanish and I wasn't that good, but I was really determined. So, I was listening to the radio a lot. I remember I was just lying on the couch once and I had the radio on, Spanish radio, and my friend came back in and was like, "What are you listening to?" and I was like just radio. I just want to pick up some Spanish. He was like, "You're listening to the church radio, to the Catholic church radio."

I was like, whoa! Okay. I had no idea because it was just going on and on and on. So, I think it's definitely worthwhile to have the transcripts and I've mentioned this before in the podcasts. If you've got the transcript in front of you, you're matching the sounds to the words. So, it's improving-- you're more likely to remember it if you can hear it and see it and if you are even

maybe just moving your lips while it's all happening you're getting more senses engaged in the activity.

**Karen:** Yes. I know I used to listen to Czech newscasts--

**Ben:** Wow!

**Karen:** --and when I started-- it was also on the radio. When I started listening the only thing I could understand was maybe the President of U.S.'s name when they would say it on the newscast. Eventually, I was able to pick out more and more words. It does help to see the word as you're hearing it.

**Ben:** Yes, yes, for sure and just one thing while we're talking about this. If a student can find a topic that they really like, if your passion is engineering, then find a podcast with a transcript or a documentary with subtitles about engineering and then just really immerse yourself into this so much so that you kind of like make engineering the focus of the activity rather than English.

**Karen:** Yes.

**Ben:** Yes, this is-- yes, it's just immersion basically, but it's a powerful tool to have. Also, if you can just put your whole life in English, so you start watching the news in English, you start searching the internet in English. My girlfriend has all her apps in English-- well a mixture of English and Spanish and she's Hungarian.

At first, I was kind of confused, but I was like, why is it in English? She's just like, "I have no idea. It's just what I did. It's been like that since I installed it." And I was like the reason why they are in Spanish is because I want to improve my Spanish. Fair enough.

**Karen:** It's very helpful. I think of it-- if you have that immersion, I think of it as wallpaper. It's there in your experience even if you're not consciously focused on it and it does help. That's why total immersion courses are better than only speaking English 30 minutes per week.

**Ben:** Yes, this is so true. I used to have a couple of students who would do an hour a week. And I remember telling them, I was like Eduardo, with me I'm going to be totally honest with you

that I'll try my best. Your English isn't going to improve if you're only doing one hour a week with me. It's not going to improve.

At best, you might be able to maintain the level that you have, but it's not going to improve. You need to go to England, immerse yourself or at least listen to English material in the car on the way to work, when you're at home cooking, all of this stuff.

This is-- it takes a long time, but it's worth it in the end otherwise you might find yourself sweating and you've got a job interview in English and you've got three days to prepare and like that kind of preparation to improve your English doesn't work in a couple of days.

**Karen:** No, it doesn't.

**Ben:** You need to put in-- it needs to be a long term habit, I think is the best way to describe it.

**Karen:** Right and you need enough experience listening and speaking English to have that point where you can switch your brain over to a different language. So, instead of thinking in your native language and then translating in your head how to say that in English, it's better if you can switch over and just speak English. So, it takes many hours to get to that point and that's what you were saying. Just put those hours and it will pay off.

**Ben:** Absolutely. I think Benny Lewis from Fluent in 3 Months mentioned once-- I think it's on a TEDx talk, but he says one technique that helped him was to just start thinking in Spanish. He would go around the supermarket and instead of trying to organize his shopping list in English, he just translated it and he was like, "Okay, patatas," and he was just thinking patatas, patatas, like potatoes, potatoes. Like where am I going to find the potatoes?

He was just translating all his thoughts into Spanish. It goes back to what we were saying before: repetition is the mother of all learning. This is why you encourage the intensive courses or why I encourage the immersive technique.

It's just a matter of putting in the hours, repeating it over and over and over again. Likewise, just to go back to IELTS if you can get yourself in an IELTS speaking situation and simulate a part

3 exam-- sorry, a speaking exam then it's going to help you and your panic uncover certain areas that you've got and problem areas then you can identify where you want to improve.

At the end of the day, putting in the practice and staying motivated. Hopefully, this is where Karen and I come in to help keep you motivated.

**Karen:** We hope so.

**Ben:** Do you have any motivation strategies for your students?

**Karen:** I try to be as encouraging as possible and I agree with you. You have to let people know that one hour a week with me is not going to improve anything. So, it's very important to do the homework, pay attention to it, and listen to anything or practice anything in English that you can any other time.

It's a little more difficult online because in a classroom I would have more games with maybe small prizes or something. That's more difficult on Skype with one-to-one. So, I try to find things like that, but they are kind of scarce, but I do have motivated students though I have to say.

**Ben:** Yes, that's an absolute blessing, isn't it? I love having motivated students. It makes a world of difference.

**Karen:** It does.

**Ben:** Because if you're both determined to reach an objective and it's the same objective, then everything just goes so much smoother and is so much enjoyable for everybody involved.

**Karen:** That's right.

**Ben:** Can I ask you, Karen, what type of homework do you set for your students?

**Karen:** Well, it depends. I have different situations. Usually, I try to find a textbook that we can follow. So, the student has one and I have one. I follow the book unless I fill in with my own materials sometimes.

I have a student right now, for example, who's studying for the German Abitur, which is the big test after high school. Kind of like for American students they might think about the SATs. It's that level of test. So, there is a specific thing she needs to do and that is write compositions. So, her homework is writing compositions and using transition words and so on.

Another student I have he's a lawyer and he needs contract law English. So, he doesn't really have homework, he brings it to me. So, we go over that just to make sure-- I'm not a lawyer of course, so I can't advise him, but he wants to make sure that he understands the text. So, that's very interesting.

Then I have a woman who is very high-level English, but she's interested in English literature. So, we find a book and we both read it and discuss the chapters. So, her homework is reading. So, it's really tailored to the specific student. Everybody needs something different.

**Ben:** Got you, got you. Interesting and the homework I give my students is basically from the online course. Everybody gets the same writing essays because it's focused for the IELTS writing exam, but the feedback is different, of course depending on what they've written and it's kind of tailored in that respect. The actual task is the same, but the feedback is completely different for each student depending on their needs.

So, I think we are coming to the end of the podcast. Is there anything that you would like to mention before we finish?

**Karen:** Just that remember that mistakes are part of the process of learning a language. Don't be afraid to make them because when you are speaking to a native speaker and they do understand you even if you have made some small mistakes, it's a really big reward for that. In your students' case, passing that test is the ultimate goal.

**Ben:** Absolutely. Yes, yes, absolutely. I think when you are learning a language, you've got to be prepared to look like an idiot at times and you will do. It's going to be inevitable. Nobody learns a language and speaks it perfectly the first time, but once you do learn the language, you can start having some serious fun.

I will just tell you this quick anecdote before we finish. It's embarrassing but it's also funny as well. I was in Valencia and I just spent a whole year learning Spanish and I was quite pleased with myself and I could maintain a conversation and I sounded relatively Spanish. To non-Spanish speakers, I sounded Spanish.

I remember these two Irish ladies. They approached me in the street and they tried to speak Spanish to me and it was really, really, basic Spanish. They were asking for directions and then I just shouted back at them in Spanish because the Spaniards speak quite loudly. I just totally pretended to be Spanish and shouted back at them. It was a little bit evil. They looked at me and they were like, "It's over there, over there," in Spanish and I was like yes, yes, yes, straight down there. I only did it--

**Karen:** You did take on a persona.

**Ben:** Yes, exactly I only did it because I was like I finally learned a language and I'm going to use it. I'm not going to use my English with these people. I'm going to have some fun and use Spanish. Yes, that's what I wanted to say. Once you get confident with the language, it's all-- not all fun and games, but there's a lot more fun and games.

**Karen:** It's a lot more fun. Yes, yes.

**Ben:** Exactly. Okay, so thank you very much, Karen. Can you mention your site again for us, please?

**Karen:** Absolutely. It's [www.slowamericanenglish.net](http://www.slowamericanenglish.net)

**Female Voice:** Thanks for listening to [ieltspodcast.com](http://ieltspodcast.com).