



Amanda: If I get rumbly just pull me back in.

Ben: Got you. No worries. No problem.

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.

Ben: Hello there, IELTS podcast students. In this tutorial, we're going to speak with a pronunciation expert and she's agreed to join us for an interview and we're going to talk all about pronunciation. We're going to talk about why you might struggle under exam conditions, the fastest way to improve... Yes, there's just going to be a lot of tips to help you progress with your English speaking. So, welcome to the podcast, Amanda.

Amanda: Hi, great. Thank you so much for having me, Ben.

Ben: You're welcome. Could you tell us a bit about yourself? About your site and why you chose pronunciation?

Amanda: Well, sure. I live in Seattle, Washington in the United States, so my pronunciation is very American English. I started the website pronuncian.com I think back around in 2006 or so. It really focuses on American English pronunciation and the sounds of English, some other patterns of English that non-native English speakers would really need in order to give them a lot of free resources to go and start learning things on their own.



Ben: Excellent. We're not even into the first question yet but I'm going to go a bit off-piste. Just one thing that popped into my mind now was that in England, Received Pronunciation accent is Cambridge, Oxford around that area. That's like supposed to be the most neutral and in the U.S. which are the cities or regions which are standard American pronunciation?

Amanda: That is such a great and unanswerable question. It's something I hear a lot. A lot of people say where do I want to sound like? No matter where you're from, you have an accent when you compare it to other people that are from somewhere else. The United States never figured out how to say hey, in England, Britain, UK, they've got this Received Pronunciation. It's a standard. It gives somebody to strive for and teach to.

The United States never established that, which makes it really pretty tough for people trying to deal with learning American English pronunciation. The way that I teach is not so much region-based or city-based but the dictionary will always show you. Here's how the majority of people say this word and here's how other people might say it. It doesn't mean all people say all those words the same, but if you pick anybody in the United States from anywhere, there's a likelihood this is how they say the word.

That being said, there's a different word they might say differently. So, that's the way that I have chosen to deal with the fact that we don't have a good standard here is what the dictionary says is most common.



Ben: Wow, that's interesting. I never knew that. I know this is in your field. With regards to Canada, is it the same situation?

Amanda: I think Canada is the same that they don't have a standard and-- Canada is so interesting because they've kept a lot of the British spellings, but their pronunciation is much more similar to what is in the United States with the exception of a few little words. And they have one vowel sound that's quite a bit different from what American English is.

Ben: I wonder-- I'm going to check on Australia as well. That's my night set up. That's what I'll be doing for the rest of the evening. Let's move on. Why did you choose to specialize in pronunciation?

Amanda: It wasn't actually a real conscious choice. I was starting to teach-- tutoring. I started teaching privately. As a tutor, I was working with a lot of adults and the number one request was can you help me with my pronunciation? As a young and starving tutor, I said, of course, I can. I'm an English teacher. I'm a native speaker. That should be simple, right?

So, I started diving in almost immediately into the specialty of pronunciation because that's what they were asking for. So, then real quick okay I need to update what my knowledge is about English pronunciation and how it's taught and what materials exist and everything that was out there because I just-- I didn't have that huge background in it when I first started teaching it in 2005.



Ben: I find as well that like if you listen to the students and you start delivering what they are asking for, you quickly become competent and you can choose to specialize in that as well and then you can really start to deliver results especially if you're getting into a feedback loop and testing. This works and this doesn't work.

I find that even just testing ideas and doing a lot of research, you can really deliver big improvements and almost-- well usually in my experience usually faster than textbooks and the traditional resources just because you keep on tailoring and tailoring what you've got and testing and testing. Yes, this is--

Amanda: Yes, you're absolutely right.

Ben: Yes, this is what I found. The improvement cycle you can just really get some fast results. The next question is why do you think students struggle under exam conditions?

Amanda: Anybody taking an exam they are pretty normal, human have some anxiety about the fact that they are going to be tested and as soon as anxiety kicks in things that you used to know tend to disappear. The lower those skill level is in something, the more quickly it disappears.

So, if you are taking this exam and you're trying to focus on your content whether you're speaking or you're writing and you're going okay, I need to answer this question. You're trying



to create all the vocabulary that you need and then you're trying to put verb tenses in the order that you know very well.

Then sometimes pronunciation can be the one thing that because you don't have that muscle memory built up, it can disappear and you can say things that you would never have expected you would say. I haven't made that mistake in forever. Now I did it. Well, your brain is very busy during an exam and so the more that you have that muscle memory in place of how to pronounce a word, the less you need to think about that and the more mental energy you can devote to answering this exam question.

Ben: Absolutely. So, if you've got your pronunciation up to scratch and up to such a level where it's almost autopilot then you basically-- you can free up resources and focus on other parts whereas if your skill level isn't-- if you haven't got it up to autopilot and your still consciously thinking about it then it's going to basically suck resources from the content, as you said, from the grammar structure and everything like that.

Just going back to what we were talking about before when we were talking about studying and preparing exercises for the students, what exercises have you found for a real fast improvement for students? What could they do?

Amanda: When I'm working with my students, I always assess them. Every student gets an assessment the very first thing of their very first class so that I know here are the specific areas



that are causing you trouble. I never want it to appear every non-native English speaker has this problem. So, I just work on it.

I focus on here's the problem that you are making that is going to make-- most people go huh? or give you that look where you realize they didn't quite understand you. So, we focus on whatever that is first and so if it's a certain set of sounds it's that. If it's syllable stress it's that and maybe they are very fluent already, but their speech sounds a little bit choppy because they are not blending from word to word and linking. So, then we'll start with that. If it's an intonation error then we'll go there.

For the majority of my students, it seems that their miscommunication comes from sounds that just don't exist in their first language. They might not even know that those sounds exist in any language and so a good introduction to that here's the sound, here's all the words-- not all of them, but here's a good set of words that it's in.

We do a lot of drilling similar to speech pathology. It's somewhat language class, but it is also really a nuts and bolts skill and there are other teachers that are very, very good conversation teachers or grammar teachers or things like that. What I focus on are those really tiny little things that often come once a person is already fluent enough in a language where they are starting to take tests in that language.



Ben: Interesting. Two points that I want to drill down into. The first one was you give them an assessment. When you're doing the assessment, is it like a list of 50 sentences and then you'll maybe circle-- you've got a copy there reading it and then you're just circling this was right, this was wrong, this was right. How does that assessment-- or is it just a free conversation? How do you conduct that assessment?

Amanda: Well, it starts-- usually, I'll tell them we're going to chat to get to know each other a little and to make them comfortable, but during that time I'm listening for what I expect to hear and what might surprise me. As I'm sure you know, different language groups tend to cluster in errors that they make. So, if I have a person from a certain language group, this is probably going to happen.

So, I'm listening to see if that does-- if they create those errors when they don't know they are being assessed. Then from there, we go on to a scripted assessment that goes through all the sounds of English and through a pretty extensive list of words and then sentences where I'm listening for linking and blending and contractions and stress and then paragraphs where I'm listening for stress and intonation.

Also, there could be something-- when they know they are reading a single word, they are at their best and so I'll be like okay, they said that word really well here, but they didn't say that word correctly when they were just chatting or when it was in a paragraph, they didn't say it.



So, that's a clue to me that there's a habit that they have established, but they also know how to say it and our job is to fix the habit so that they don't have to think about how to say that word anymore. It just comes out more naturally through a lot of repetition and drills and things that can seem to go on for a long time sometimes, but that's how we build muscle memory; just like you're playing an instrument or a sport.

Ben: Interesting, interesting. So, it's a mixture of sort of like a conversation where they're getting reviewed and then it follows to sort of like a structured test procedure with the words like you said and the sentences and also the different features of pronunciation such as stress and the specific sounds. That's really interesting. And the drills, could you explain more about the drills? I'm a big fan of drills because I know that they are really--

Amanda: Oh, great.

Ben: Yes, I know that they are really effective.

Amanda: That's so good to hear.

Ben: Yes, I used to work in one academy and it really-- before I worked there I thought it was like a cult because all they did was drills and I went in there once and like-- eventually I did join and I did become a teacher there, but they would to get the pronunciation and the grammar structures, they would do a question affirmative negative sentence.



So, it started off with “Are they playing? They are playing. They aren’t playing.” And then we'd go on to the next verb and the next person. “Is she writing? She is writing.” There are like 11 kids all at the same time doing this and it’s like we do this with 7 different people; he, she, it, and then about 8 different verbs; play, write, and we go through all the tenses.

A whole class of about 12 students “Is she playing? She is playing. She isn't playing.” Okay, next one. This is why it seemed a bit weird at first, but it was really effective. It was like this for twenty minutes at the beginning of every single class. We did this because it worked. Students weren't a massive fan of it, but the thing is the drills worked.

Amanda: Exactly, they do get difficult to keep doing. It's so interesting because I haven’t heard another teacher in a long time say that they are a fan of drills. I'm not sure when you got your educational background in teaching English, but when I did, drills were out. They were and we were specifically told don't do drills. Everything should be communicative learning.

I had immediate pushback because I thought well-- and I was already teaching. I was tutoring before actually I finished my English teaching certificate because I was teaching privately. So, I was already seeing results from drills at the same time as all of my teacher teachers were saying never do drills and I thought but how do they learn this?

They have a purpose. I think what it was was pushback from earlier decades where everything was drills. Well, you don't learn a language from drills. You perfect a language from drills and



you increase your recall through drills. Of course, you're not going to actually become communicative in a language if all you do is drills.

So, I think there's a place for both and so we bring in-- with my students we do a lot of drills, but then for a lot of them the last ten minutes of class is a conversation where I'm correcting them. Every sentence I have a correction for them.

I only correct them on skills they've already learned otherwise it's very overwhelming if you are a learner to be corrected on things you don't understand. So, I'm correcting them on that, the skill that we just learned so that they can realize the words that they use or the sentence structures that they use that those skills help with. Go ahead.

Ben: No, I was just going to say I'm in total agreement with-- that the drills are effective, but if you do a 90-minute class of just drills, the students will hate you. Also, you need to find this balance, but at the same time, we can't just throw them out because the student finds them boring.

They are effective and in my experience, they are just very effective and they work. We do need to find a balance for them. Could you tell us what specific drills you do? Is it just words or sentences or...

Amanda: It depends on what skill they are deficient in. I wrote a book at the beginning of this just because I had to create my own material for students because I couldn't find things online



that were adequate for what I felt their needs were. Eventually, I just had so many separate lessons I was like let's put a table of contents on this and fill in the gaps and call it a book.

There is one of those called pronunciation pages that's for the sounds of English. That book is really just for sounds. Here are the sounds, here's how to say them, here's how they are spelled because I think it is important and really helpful if students have a general idea of sound spelling correspondence because that's still how we teach kids to read at least in the United States.

There is-- English is definitely phonetically challenging, but there are patterns and they can be really helpful for learners. So, that's included too. There's an appendix at the back of it that has all-- I teach those 43 sounds of English. Different linguists choose different numbers of sounds, but 43 works best for me for teaching.

So, all 43 sounds are in the back of the book with that sound at the beginning of the word, somewhere in the middle of the word and also at the end of the word if that sound exists in that part of the word in English. So, there's probably about 5,000 words back there I think. So, it's a huge bank of words that people get to become familiar with.

They start with one syllable words then work up to three, four, maybe even five syllable words. Students can passively start to learn some syllable stress rules and they can keep coming across the same words. Syllable stress is extraordinarily complicated in English. I teach it to students



who have specific patterns that they have trouble with because of-- here's a pattern and it's really, really regular.

That's the beautiful thing of syllable stress is it's very regular for the words that have patterns. There are also a ton of patterns which makes it complicated. So, along with the sound practice when they're working on that sound, they're also hearing a lot of multi-syllable words to start to internalize those patterns.

Ben: I see. Could we just do like maybe a practice drill with me now as if I were the student?

Amanda: We would need some content in front of us.

Ben: Okay, okay, okay. We could do it another time, no worries.

Amanda: Yes, if I had a list I could just shoot you easily. I would love to do that. We could maybe follow-up with another call and do that. I wonder if I would have a student that would be up for that? That takes some bravery for students to put themselves on a tape recorder, but I have some that are kind of outgoing.

Ben: So, you say the word and then they repeat it? Is that how it works?

Amanda: It goes a couple of ways. The first time through I say each word. There's a list. Say the list is a specific sound in the middle of the word and there's-- if 40 words exist with that sound



in the middle, the list has 40 words in it. So, the first time we go through I'll say each word, they repeat each word.

Then as soon as we finish that list, they read through again from the beginning to the end and I correct them on each word that there is. There is audio that also goes with the book so they go home they have the mp3 file and they can practice listening and repeat with the mp3 file at home.

Then they come back the next week. Depending on how comfortable they feel, they'll just try reading it without repeating after me so that I can see how much they've improved in the last week and we can start to pick up even more in-depth patterns.

Like you have this problem, but you only have it when it's around an 'm' or an 'n'. Then we can figure out a deeper pattern. Some are so strange. It's always going to be tied into their first language. Maybe they have that sound in their first language, but only in very specific circumstances.

So, when it's in English and different circumstances, now that's a difficult sound. If we can figure that out, we can extract the sound from the words that they're really good at and plunk it into the words that are more challenging for them and transfer the skill over.



Ben: Wow! That's a fascinating approach. That's really methodical as well, isn't it? It's really granular.

Amanda: I've been told that, yes. I am in Seattle with Amazon and a whole bunch of technical programmers and Microsoft is here so... Also, I'm sure my teaching method got adopted to engineers and analytical minds.

Ben: Got you, got you. I see. So, some of your students are coming from those companies.

Amanda: Yes.

Ben: Got you.

Amanda: I probably wasn't supposed to say that actually.

Ben: No worries, no worries. All right, what I was going to ask you next is what in your experience have been the fastest ways to improve a student's pronunciation?

Amanda: The more they can continue to think about it, the better. So, they say how many hours a week do I need to study this at home? If they are willing to give it less time more often, they will usually do better than somebody who crams for three hours before a class. I used to have a student that would be late to class because he would be in the parking lot practicing and I'm like that's not really the most effective use of your time.



If they can give it-- practice in small chunks because there are so many drills and we've already discussed drills are not super entertaining. If they start zoning out while they are doing the drill, the drill is doing no good at all. The students who improve the fastest are the ones who spend just five or ten minutes on a specific skill per day.

Then from that, if they're able to really dial into things that they are hearing native English speakers do and a scripted format is always going to be easiest at first, but not necessarily like watch an entire movie or TV show but take four minutes of it and print it out and notice all the things that are going on in that.

Notice how often the sound happens or notice where there was a pause. Notice how this sound changed in this context compared to that context. Again, this is my super analytical students, but the more they dive into the details of that and start to self-explore, they come back to class and they have questions. Why did this happen right here?

That opens up an opportunity to explain why it happens and also it builds their trust in the process. This actually is very patterned and there just happens to be a ton of patterns, but it is patterned. So, once they start to pick up on those patterns and notice them, then they create their own momentum to practicing more and learning more.

Also if they are willing to record themselves-- I've done a ton of podcasts and I got used to the sound of my own voice over time. It's almost fun for nobody at first, but being able to do it and



hear yourself back again is a great way because you hear the native speaker you're listening to and then you hear yourself back and your brain will pick up that was different. If you don't know why-- they'll come back to me and say, "This is different, but why?" You can tell them why it's different.

Ben: Got you. Got you. So, it's one thing sort of like you can identify why-- sorry, that it is different, but that it's like a whole new level if you can understand why it's different.

Amanda: Yes.

Ben: Got you. Then just going back to what you said beforehand and you said just a little bit; 10, 15 minutes a day of intense focus and active study is better than an hour of passive study just watching a TV program in English. I just wanted to say with that I completely agree.

Also, with that 15 minutes of focused and intense study it's real-- like you said, if they can start to deconstruct and understand the patterns it's just-- From my personal experience with languages, I know it's better to study for a small amount of time frequently at an intense level and also what helped me was deconstructing it and finding out the formulas within the language as well.

Once you crack the formula, you can open up like a couple of hundred words just from knowing the formula rather than memorizing a hundred words, which is going to take forever. I totally agree with you there. The next question what about a long-term strategy to improve? What



would you recommend for this? Would you say the same as before like the 10, 15 minutes or slightly [unintelligible 00:26:04.12]?

Amanda: If somebody can tolerate it for pronunciation, it's like pronunciation is just not the most exciting topic for people to really dive into unless they are linguistic freaks like I am where it's like this is really cool. Most people deal with it because they see the purpose of it. For the long term, of course, it's helpful if you can have a private tutor, but I fully understand that there is a great [unintelligible 00:26:32.05] of people out there that can't have a private tutor for whatever reason.

But for that, in the long term, the more exposure that they have to the more different Englishes the better. They can hear this person said this but this person said that. Some of my students get so good at this. Even one person within one sentence says the same word differently and they can catch it and go why did she do that? There is an interesting reason why most of the time.

People who become excellent listeners become excellent speakers. In classes, a lot of the drills we do are minimal pairs between two similar sounds and over and over and over again, but they start to recognize that sound and then they start to self-correct. If you're not actively listening, you'll never recognize the sound and you won't recognize whether the sound is coming out of your own mouth correctly or not.



Ben: That's fantastic. That kind of confirms what I've often thought about was whenever I had a student who was really good in music like played about five different instruments down at the local orchestra and all of these, they always seem to be way above the level in sort of like raw natural talent with the language.

Amanda: Right, their rhythm can be just [unintelligible 00:27:56.21] almost immediately.

Ben: Exactly. Yes, yes, the pronunciation. I remember asking one guy, how did you know that and he was just like I don't know, but it just sounded right like that.

Amanda: Right. It's so wonderful. Those are great students.

Ben: Exactly. Yes, yes. It just confirms what you're saying. The ones who are good listeners really progress to become good speakers as well. Next point-- final point actually, common errors for non-English speakers. I guess--

Amanda: Oh my goodness.

Ben: Yes, exactly. I guess it varies on the language group, doesn't it?

Amanda: It varies a huge amount. There are some issues that you can be guaranteed almost every non-native English speaker's going to have this error. My approach to these errors is-- to



me, it's really common sense, but it also seems to be a little bit unusual or not commonly occurring.

I assess each student and I don't start with what's really obvious like the 'th' sounds. I'll start with what's causing them the most communication and if it happens to happen that the 'th' sounds are causing miscommunication, we'll start with that. Because not every non-native English speaker has trouble with 'th', native English speakers are really good at deciphering what that person said.

We already can adapt to that very easily whereas certain vowel sounds if they are off, we really have no idea what that person said because we haven't adapted to that particular error. Almost all of my students end up starting with some kind of vowel sound just because that's what they are doing that is making them have the most miscommunication.

This is why pronunciation is kind of nasty. We don't have standard names for sounds in English and we have-- American English, we have somewhat of a setup of vowel names. They are terrible names, but they are very indoctrinately ingrained into American English because we still teach six-year-olds this is what the name of this sound is; the long vowels and the short vowels. That's the hard part of--

Ben: Are you referring to A, E, I, O, U, Y as the name of the vowel sounds?



Amanda: Yes, exactly, but then short vowels are a little less straightforward than what they are, but we have to call them something because I can't draw a symbol in the air every time that I need to reference a vowel sound. So, I have to have some kind of name for that sound.

We go through and establish which vowel sounds are you having trouble with. It is kind of similar to the 'th' sound is one in American English we call the short 'i' sound; the sound in the word sit. Most people have problems with that sound if they are not native English speakers and it will sound like seat and then their problem is-- people think they are swearing when they are not which is interesting but you probably have that too. "Why does everybody think I'm swearing?"

Because we've adapted to you saying the sound incorrectly but you are actually saying sit just right or beach just right. You have no problem with that and it's our ears trying to adapt to your particular accent. So, we sit down first and go through the sounds that are the most difficult and the most commonly mispronounced.

For American English, a lot of students have a lot of trouble with the short 'a' sound because interestingly enough most of my students no matter where they're from in the world learned Received Pronunciation because Received Pronunciation had the textbooks and so they learned British English.



That sound æ is not very common in British English, but it's used a whole lot in American English. So, we work on that sound and then the difference between æ and ā is really close. That sort of depends. If they don't have a lot of other errors, we'll work on that, but a lot of students have trouble with that.

Ben: So, you're riding the students of Received Pronunciation?

Amanda: If they want me to, only if they want me to.

Ben: The Queen will not be happy with you, Amanda.

Amanda: I have a lot of international students that don't live in the United States and so for them, we don't focus on anything that's American specific. We'll leave their 'a' sounds exactly the way they are. We don't touch that then and so it's only the people who are living here we say okay, we're going to really dive into American English.

Ben: Got you, got you. That's really interesting that they were all brought up with Received Pronunciation. I never knew that.

Amanda: So many; even Central and South America same thing.



Ben: Wow! I never knew that. We're coming near the end now. Is there anything that you think my students would benefit from with regards to pronunciation, anything that I've missed that you'd like to tell them?

Amanda: I think one thing that can benefit any student that's trying to figure out more about pronunciation is to learn how many sounds English has in whatever version of English they are using. If it's British English okay, learn it. If it's Australian English, okay. Whatever it is and Wikipedia will tell you here are the sounds.

Learn how many sounds we have so that you have this inventory and you can start to figure out this sound was different than that sound. I thought these two words were the same, but they are actually different. That starts to tune your ear into what is going on with sounds of English.

The other thing is every single time you learn a new vocabulary word, learn which syllable is stressed. It will make your life so much easier later. I wish every English teacher, and I understand English teachers they don't have the time and resources to really focus on English pronunciation when they are working with beginner students, but I wish every single word stress was learned as the word was learned because that's very learnable and makes a huge difference in being understood on what you've said.

Ben: Absolutely. That's gold. That advice that as soon as you learn a word, learn the correct pronunciation for it, I think that's-- I've said similar stuff. I've said similar points before and I



also like the idea of figuring out all the sounds in the English language and, of course, the words which those sounds are heard in as well. That is fantastic advice there, Amanda. It's really useful.

If a student wanted to get in contact with you and wanted to start learning with you what could they find at your site? It's pronuncian.com. Is that correct?

Amanda: Yes. Well, pronuncian.com is mostly a content site. That's where there is a ton of free material and you can buy the books that I have self-published on there. If they are interested in tutoring and language classes, then it's actually a separate site; seattlelearning.com and they can see prices.

I teach Skype and in person. It's probably like half and half. Half of my students are local Seattle and the other half are anywhere in the world. Seattle Learning is the best place to find me for-- actually getting in touch with me, but Pronuncian is where if you really want to see the inventory of sounds in American English, that's where it's at.

Ben: Fantastic. Excellent. Thank you once again for doing this interview.

Amanda: Thank you, Ben.

Ben: You're welcome. You're welcome.

Female Voice: Thanks for listening to ieltspodcast.com