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INTRODUCTION

Ben: Hello there, IELTS students. In this tutorial, we've got Karen from Blue Canoe Learning and she is a pronunciation expert. Fancy messing up on that word. The irony. Anyway, she's a pronunciation expert and she's going to help us today by sharing her knowledge and to give us some advice about pronunciation-- mess it up again. So, this is going to be helpful for you and probably for me as well by the sounds of things. So, Karen, could you introduce yourself and tell us how you help students, please.



Karen: Sure. My name is Karen Taylor and I'm the head of education at Blue Canoe which is an interactive app for English pronunciation. Specifically, I'm the co-author of the methodology i.e. the underlying basis of Blue Canoe and so we've developed a strong brain-based methodology for teaching pronunciation through colors and movement as a way to reach the brain in new and innovative ways.

Ben: Interesting, interesting, yes. I had a look at the chart and I saw in the middle it's a yellow mustard color and it says cup. Is that right? Could you just explain that for me?

Karen: Sure. So, yes. This is a chart that-- you've seen versions of this chart in any pronunciation textbook where we can see how the vowels occur in our mouth, right? That toward the front we have i and e and a and then toward the back we have u, for example. That refers to where the tongue is in the front of the mouth or if it's pulled back in the back like u, right?

But in the middle, that's the most interesting place because we have this central space that is the resting space for English speakers. The resting space is that sound we make when we're



hesitating like uh, uh. So, that is-- and we name it. We name it. We call it a cup of mustard uh right to name-- give it a name that has the sound embedded in the name and that way we're not having to memorize anything.

Ben: Beautiful, beautiful.

Karen: So, we have a long phrase right there. It's very-- yes, it's a fascinating vowel.

Ben: Yes, we're going a bit of script now, but can I just ask you another question about the resting place because it's going to be I guess a different sound for different languages the resting sound, isn't it? Do you know any other resting sounds in other languages?

Karen: Yes, and maybe you can pitch in with some too and I imagine even within Englishes, it will be slightly different, but we all refer to it in the same way because all these words shift in the same way for various English speakers, right?

Ben: Right.



Karen: So, I'll call a cup of mustard [pronunciation] and for you it might be slightly higher or lower. That's fine. For Spanish speakers though it's not [pronunciation]. It will sound more like [pronunciation] or for French-- yes. And so for French there's one that it's a bit [pronunciation]. It's a little more forward a little more--

Ben: That's fascinating.

Karen: Yes.

Ben: I never really thought about it. I just assumed, but now that the penny has dropped and I totally remembered in Spain it was this [pronunciation] rather than mmm. That's amazing. Wow! Okay. So, let's get back to applying your pronunciation skills to help students because we've got a question here and it's basically for the listeners because they're all preparing for their exam. And a lot of students' pronunciation skills deteriorate in exam conditions. It's probably because of the nerves I imagine, but do you know any way to combat this?



Karen: You know I have a nice strategy that I find works time and again both for native speakers and non-native speakers of English and I'll back up by just saying that I think the reason we have difficulty in those situations is that we shouldn't have to think about pronunciation. We're really wired to just speak. So, if you're also thinking about the way that you sound, it's really difficult to deliver what you want to say, right? The meaning gets overshadowed by how you express the meaning and then we almost have a shutdown. It's very-- it's a clash almost like your hard drive has two applications open and you have to stop everything.

So, you need strategies to stop thinking about how we sound and instead to support talking while we deliver our message. And the strategy that I've worked with over the last 15 years in particular is a physical strategy and it's actually embedded already in the way that English speakers speak.



Right now if you could see me, I'm using my head on certain syllables and I'm gesturing and my eyebrows go up on these syllables and some people are very expressive with their hands coming out and other people are very expressive with their faces. So, we harness that. We use that and we have developed just a very formalized simple gesture and it's the opening sort of as if you were about to reach out to your shelf to pick up the sugar off of your kitchen cabinet shelf, right? You just reach out and grab it and as you're reaching that's the stress syllable of a word or a phrase.

So, the stressed syllable of a word or phrase, all of that [pronunciation] are these stresses that make English sound natural and that we require as English listeners to understand the speaker.

Ben: Okay. Let me just see if I got this right. So, to remember the stress syllable or the sound what a stress syllable is, it's the one that we-- the sound that we make when we're stretching for something from the shelf. Is that right?



Karen: Yes. We have to find a little closer description especially because our listeners can't see me, but if we say for example, what are you going to do? What are you going to do? You can hear a kind of [pronunciation]. So, these higher or longer notes the ones that last longer in time are the ones that we call stressed.

Ben: Right, right, right.

Karen: Yes. If I deliver it as what are you going to do? What are you going to do? Now, I sound robotic and I don't sound very comprehensible and it sounds fast, doesn't it?

Ben: Yes, yes.

Karen: Yes.

Ben: Okay. So the way--

Karen: You take more time on what and do as if those-- if we only heard those two words, those two syllables, I'd probably still understand what you'd asked me. Like if it were very noisy in the



room and you say Karen, what do? I'm going to leave this room. So, they are the important syllables of the important words, right? What are you going to do?

Ben: Right.

Karen: [unintelligible 00:08:09.00] our hand and grab for the sugar if you will. Reach for the sugar and this is what-- what's so beautiful is by reaching for the sugar with your arm and I'm really talking about literally moving your hand is that the time it takes to open your arm is beautifully measured as the time we need on the syllable in English.

Ben: Got you. Okay.

Karen: Yes. We're very sensitive to the time on the stressed syllable in ways that other languages aren't.

Ben: Interesting and we can gauge the amount of stress that we're going to apply to the word by it's roughly the same amount of time it takes to stretch to reach out for something off the shelf.



Karen: Yes and another-- actually another really helpful strategy that-- it's the same strategy. It's just a different way of doing it is to take a rubber band and to hold it between your thumbs and you can stretch it out to the sides, right? Open it up and that I've actually used that years ago with a gentleman who was preparing for an interview and so it's very subtle because he could hold his rubber band down below and just-- he was on the phone-- and he could just stretch it on those syllables so he sounded really calm. So, he's doing it like this right and then he's [unintelligible 00:09:29.11] by it. Yes.

Ben: Right. Now I got you. Okay. So, they can use it like a guidance as to how much stress to apply on these stress words.

Karen: Yes. So, it's basically a-- it's like a time guide to hitting the rhythm of English without sounding too fast.

Ben: Got you. Beautiful. Okay. I like that.



Karen: And I like that because then you don't end up worrying about these smaller details like oh, my th sound might sound off or I wonder if they noticed that my l and my r are you know. All of those smaller things generally don't cause misunderstanding as much as the lack of rhythm that we expect as listeners.

Ben: That is so true. That is so true. If there's no rhythm there, if it's not the expected rhythm, it's ten times more difficult to understand them. Yes, that's some great advice there and then I need to tap your brain again Karen for some more advice. Are you aware of any powerful drills a student could do to improve their pronunciation? I mean if you're not a fan of drills no worries. Personally, I am, but I know that every student is different and every tutor is different-- every expert has their opinion.

Karen: Yes. Well, we can call them drills. I call them routines. I think practice is so important, so yes. We can call it a drill. I'm not against that, but take any kind of a phrase or what we call sort of a chunk of language. I would avoid practicing just individual words because we don't talk



like that. I don't turn to you and say forgive or indispensable. We don't say these things by themselves, right?

Ben: Thank goodness, no.

Karen: So, what is it we need to say and what are you likely to need to say? If you don't know what the questions will be, you know that you need some phrases that help you get time to think. So, I could say well, one of the best ways that I know... That's a really good time buyer, right? So, there's a nice [unintelligible 00:11:50.08] and then there's a lot of rhythm in there. So, I could practice that and drill one of the best things I've done, one of the best things I've seen, one of the most interesting things I've seen... You hear the rhythm in that?

Ben: Yes, totally, totally. Got you. So, you recommend maybe finding a few of these kind of like time saving phrases, but don't just master it word by word. Get the whole rhythm in there. I love this advice. I love this because it's going to-- as you said, it's going to free up some time, free up some mental energy and it gets you off to a perfect start.



Karen: Yes. If your listeners like to listen to TED Talks, for example, online you can look at what these folks do as they're preparing what they're going to say and they use a lot of these kinds of time-taking phrases actually, right? We say them to take time so that we have time to plan the next real piece of content.

Ben: Absolutely. I think I just did it then.

Karen: Exactly. Right then you lean in and you say that's fascinating.

Ben: Absolutely.

Karen: And then that gives us all a pause and then we think what are we going to do next? So, we have all of these unconscious strategies that allow us to relax while we speak and I think learners often miss out on that opportunity and it's so stressful.

I had a gentleman that I worked with who explained or described the way that it is for him. He said it's so tiring because I feel like I'm always just one step ahead of what I need to say, but not



enough steps. So, I'm just looking for the next word and then the next word as if laying out a stone path block by block or stone by stone. And once we started working on these phrases, these chunks and pausing, he was really able to relax.

Ben: Yes. I've had students like this that speak in their own language, in Spanish, they're speaking a million words per minute and then they tried to keep the same rhythm, the same speed for English and they didn't have the vocabulary to go at that speed. And like you said, a few filler phrases can just slow them down and then help them organize their answer to sound much more elegant rather than stumbling and stuttering like a car that's run out of petrol.

Karen: That's right. That's well put and even listening to you just now, Ben I could hear the rhythm and the pausing and listen to me, right? The rhythm and the pausing. I mean we do this naturally and we want to share that intuition with our learners. We want them to just keep with this kind of confidence, know when it's good to pause.



Ben: Yes. This is another a technique that I've taught students before just to insert those pauses into your language and it makes you sound incredibly more intelligent-- not more intelligent but at least more eloquent rather than filling it up with those filler sounds we were mentioning before at the beginning. I just put in a pause there. My friend calls them a pregnant pause for some reason, but you just stop and then collect your thoughts and start again.

Karen: And I think what you're describing goes hand in hand with the idea of having a phrase ready to go which is that if you pause, whether pregnant or not, if you pause in the wrong place, if you pause in the wrong place and that's strange, right? So, we have to have a grammatical phrase before the pause and then another one and then another one, right? And so these pauses now instead of seeming like oh, what is he going to say? Now you think ooh, he's a real thoughtful person.

Ben: Yes, absolutely.

Karen: This person is very profound.



Ben: Yes. I think Steve Jobs was a massive executioner of this technique. If you listen to interviews that he's done, he's always pausing like a good 10 sec-- no maybe not so long, but a good five seconds before answering the question. And he's collecting his thoughts, he's organizing it and it just makes him sound profoundly more interesting. It makes him sound-- it's just-- yes and because as well the answers-- because he's had time to organize it does deliver rather than just blurting out the first thought that comes into his mind.

Okay. Next question. Is there an 80/20 hack for English pronunciation? I'm not a big fan of this question, but I know a lot of students are in exam-- well, they're going to have their exam pretty soon and they need this hack. I'm a much bigger proponent of lifelong learning and taking the long-term approach, but I do know we get ourselves into these short-term situations. So, is there an 80/20 hack for English pronunciation or some techniques for fast improvement?

Karen: Well, if I were to pick one 80/20 hack--

Ben: I know what you're doing, Karen.



Karen: Maybe it's that I-- what I've developed and what I've been working on for the bulk of my professional life is itself kind of an 80/20 hack, but it takes more time than just before your exam but let me see if I can pull out from that because I know we want to reach your listeners with a powerful strategy.

We've already talked about this open hand strategy or the stretching rubber band, right? It's really about word stress and phrase stress. So, maybe we can build on that. I have a couple of hacks that have to do with unwiring our reliance on the way a word is spelled and I think a lot of times our learners might have pronunciations that aren't so much about their accent, but pronunciations that are off because they believe the spelling is telling them something that's actually not the case, right? So, that would be-- there would be some work there that is not a just before the exam kind of strategy.

Ben: Right.



Karen: So, what can they do right before exams? I would say walking around for a few days before the exam and really using their hand the whole time and starting to feel that rhythm. Why? Because at first, it's going to feel like a sound that's not theirs. It can sound like somebody else. The time that it takes-- right there-- the time that it takes that may feel very foreign to a learner of English. It may sound like they're trying to be somebody they're not and they need to get accustomed to using that stress.

So, this kind of strategy of listening to English speakers and then rewinding it and saying the same sentence again with them while using the hand. That way they're not just practicing by themselves and wondering if it's good enough, but finding those really influential talks on TED Talk that you like and listening to it and then repeating it. So, kind of shadowing or mirroring, right?

Ben: Or mimicking as well.



Karen: Mimicking in synchronicity, not so much listen repeat but listen, back up, listen again, and keep doing it basically mastering the way that person sounds and then walk away and say it five more times on your own after you've nailed it.

Ben: Right, right yes and if a student-- if they really were in a pickle so to speak and they did have their exam, they could do it with those phrases if they'd found some authentic native English speaker material with those phrases in or they've highlighted those phrases, they've identified the phrases that we were talking about like that's a really good question. I've never thought about it. These kinds of phrases.

Karen: Nice.

Ben: They could combine the repetition of these phrases along with your hand stretched technique so as to really get to grips with the rhythm and to gauge the amount of stress and the length this--yes, the time of the stress on the words.



Karen: And that repetition is so important and if I can, I'd like to explain why. When you engage with a small amount of language, a little phrase and you repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat. Do you hear that starting to sound like music to you?

Ben: Yes.

Karen: [pronunciation] and repeat and repeat. So, that switch from the language brain listening to words to the musical brain suddenly saying whoa! I hear a little song. That little song is a new way of processing that language through the musical brain and you can actually do things then. The moment you switch over, it's about 3-5 repetitions before the musical brain starts to say hold on a minute. I want to listen to this as music and then you can start to sing with it and then you can take it back over to just language.

Ben: Interesting. Wow!



Karen: So, when you repeat and repeat, now you can use that phrase again and this has been done with people who have suffered brain damage. Musical language therapy is very powerful because it gives the musical brain a little break and allows the musical-- sorry, the language brain-- it gives the language brain a little break and it allows the musical brain to do a bit of the foundation work then you send it right back over.

Ben: Interesting, interesting and this sounds like what they do in Scandinavia to learn English. It's all just songs. It's just--

Karen: Very powerful.

Ben: Three-year-olds just singing Beatles songs and nursery rhymes and stuff like that and--

Karen: Well then that would be my others. It comes down to different personality types of course, but if a listener is listening out there and is worried about an exam, my guess is that



they're the kind of person who wants to be extremely prepared and they worry. There are others who aren't as worried, right?

Ben: Yes.

Karen: So, what do we need to do right before an exam? We need to relax and trust that the work we've done is enough.

Ben: Yes.

Karen: Right and part of that would be let's go over the songs. Let's find our favorite Adele who spent so much good time on the stressed vowels. Wow! But that's not just true of Adele. That's the Beatles. That's pretty much any very popular pop artist.

Ben: So true, yes.

Karen: It is spending time on those stressed vowel sounds.



Ben: Absolutely, yes.

Karen: Especially a cup of mustard.

Ben: We'll hear that in the next song by Adele.

Karen: I'm working on a song with all those in it.

Ben: And that reminds me actually, we once did a song with a whole Task 2 writing essay. Like it's about-- I don't know-- 300, 350 words and it's got to follow this whole format for the exam and we made it into a song and it was-- I can still remember it. It's something like the challenges of pollution, but it just goes to show-- this is like three or four years ago-- that the musical brain has such powerful retention skills. It's definitely a useful tool to employ there. All right, next question. Are there ways a student can check their own pronunciation?

Karen: Is it okay to mention technology?

Ben: Oh, please. I love technology.



Karen: Okay. Is there a way for someone to check their own pronunciation completely by themselves? I would say that's pretty hard if we're talking about a second language, a different language. That's precisely what we don't know how to do and I think that's why so much pronunciation homework in the past or maybe even still is often so meaningless because they say well go home and practice these phrases or go home and practice these words. Well, how do I know if what I'm doing is right?

So, what we've been doing with Blue Canoe is providing voice recognition that instead of just transcribing what you say like Siri or Alexa that just listens and tries to process, instead we've flipped it so that it's theory saying well I understood most of that, but this part is in need of some adjustment. So, finding what is off and usually what we need to prioritize. It's you start with a stressed syllable and you work your way out from there because if the stressed syllable is off, if the location of that stress or if the vowel quality of that stress is off, really very little else is going to help repair that.



So, if I say a word like unimaginable and you say what is that? Oh, unimaginable. That is a nice long word where you can say okay, I can figure this out and it took about three to four seconds, right?

Ben: Yes.

Karen: But now if it's a word that-- a two-syllable word and it's off and suddenly you know camel, canal. Like canal; what's that? And you think the animal camel and it turns out that I'm trying to say canal.

Ben: Got you.

Karen: No, it's a huge what we call a global error. Now, the listener has no idea what that word is. It's the small words. It's the short two and three syllable words that are a problem. So, to check pronunciation, we really need some kind of external checkpoint. So, we have a couple things.



We've developed a wonderful dictionary that is not just a listening dictionary, but a visual dictionary of pronunciation.

And so in Blue Canoe, we actually have a browser extension that is now available free and that way you can double click on any word on your computer and see where's the stress because we put a line right under that stressed vowel sound and then we also provide a color code. So, is it a blue word like improvement or is it a green word like extremely? And so now you can both look at it and you can listen to a dictionary model; those classic little voices with a little audio but with the visual information you can start to do a quick check that doesn't rely on your perception.

Ben: Got you and the more senses we involve in the process as well, the more engaged we are as well. So, it then again increases the chances of recalling and remembering what we've just learned.



Karen: Yes and you can start to then-- the student who says well, I have trouble with these purple words. Purple words are hard for me. Well, now I can practice just lists of purple words and collect them.

Ben: Yes.

Karen: All of those er whether it's girl or world or work all of those are purple regardless of spelling.

Ben: Got you. Okay so like a reorganization of the language based on the sounds and the colors rather than the spelling.

Karen: Ben, you've just said it perfectly. Yes, it's a complete realignment from instead of thinking of what's the first letter in this word or the second letter in this word. I care where is the core? What's the nucleus of this word and what sound does it make and it's a vowel.

Ben: Yes.



Karen: The nucleus is always a vowel. So, we pin it down. It's like Pinterest for words.

Ben: Beautiful. You said there's three ways. We got the first one and the other two or did I miss here?

Karen: Checking their own pronunciation. So, one would be to check this dictionary. Go online and check that. The second and I think you may have mentioned this in the past in your show is YouGlish. Are you familiar with YouGlish?

Ben: No.

Karen: Oh. So, there's a wonderful website tool called YouGlish. It's y-o-u-glish like English youglish.com and you can put any word or phrase of English and then it searches through the vast coffers of YouTube videos mostly TED Talks and other kinds of more formal interviews and talks and then you can listen to multiple people of different backgrounds say this word or phrase.



Ben: Beautiful.

Karen: So, it's really brilliant because you can choose whether you want UK, US, or Australian. I mean it'd be nice if they had more, but those are three options. You can listen to all of them. So, it's just a mixture of all kinds of speakers of English and they'll say the one word you want to know about or the whole phrase, right?

Ben: That is amazing. That is fantastic. YouGlish okay.

Karen: And so yes, I-- yes and so go to YouGlish and now we've covered-- that's your tool for so much of what I've already described is to find that phrase and then you can play it over and over and over of the same speaker or you can listen across speakers and just hear that rhythm again, getting musical hearing that repetition.

Ben: Yes, yes. That's fantastic and also because you'll be listening to I don't know an Irish or an Australian or a-- no, there wasn't Irish, was there? There's just UK, US, and Australia, but by



listening just to all three, you probably-- yes, you'll definitely become aware of the small nuances; the differences each region pronounces the exact same word or phrase which I know from past experience can be terribly confusing for a student especially when they're checking their own pronunciation.

Karen: That's so important, Ben. I mean look at you and me. We don't speak in the same way and yet we completely understand each other. Here we are having a wonderful conversation. I have not once asked you to repeat yourself nor have you to me, right? And so the student who is out there worried about the one way to say this word is now provided just in this conversation across YouGlish and in Blue Canoe as well because we've built it around multiple speakers so that the machine learning is actually looking at not just one way to say it, but the multiple ways.

Ben: Beautiful.

Karen: Yes. Do you talk about your Aunt Sally or your Aunt Sally? I don't know. So, both of those are correct whether it's black cat aunt or olive sock aunt or maybe even auburn dog aunt.



You could figure that out, but there are many right ways to speak and the sooner our learners provide themselves that freedom and knowing that theirs is yet another right way to speak--

Ben: Exactly.

Karen: Yes, so long as they're really respecting and focusing on the important rules in English that there's one major stress, that the nucleus is a vowel sound, that that vowel sound needs to be in some part of the neighborhood of being recognized, right?

Ben: Yes.

Karen: If it's too far away and right now I'm talking to you and gesturing at my chart because that chart is the way to make sure you're on target just like playing darts.

Ben: Beautiful.

Karen: This is the 100% area where you get all the points and then if you're off target, the other person says huh?



Ben: Got you. Beautiful. We're definitely going to include this chart in the tutorial, so please visit the links in the show notes and you can see the chart that Karen and I are referring to-- mainly Karen is referring to. Okay. So, moving on. Can you describe the schwa sound-- I probably butchered that pronunciation-- and how to achieve it? I can never remember. Did I say it right? Schwa.

Karen: You did. I always did wait for-- so you're doing that thing where you're like I don't know if I said it correctly. I understood it otherwise I would have said huh?

Ben: Got you.

Karen: No, I mean I might have thought to myself huh, doesn't know how to say schwa, but you do. That's schwa. So, schwa is funny because it's the sound that English speakers make unconsciously and yet it's the only sound that we have an easy to remember name for it. People walk around saying.



In fact, I had a gentleman years ago, a Japanese gentleman who came to me after class. He walked up-- he was a scientist-- and he came-- a very sincere man-- and he walked up and he said teacher. I said what? You know the oh my God like Steve Jobs. I think wow! All that pausing. He's got a very profound question. So, he's pausing. He says what is the schwa?

I'm like good question because you hear about it, don't you? And then you think well, I don't think I know what the schwa is either. So, okay. So, what is schwa? Schwa is this general central space for English speakers. It's centrally located because it's a little bit like a soccer or a football goalie, right? They're in their net waiting and we do that with our vocal space; with the space in our mouth. We wait and we're preparing for these stressed syllables that come out involve the tongue moving to the front or the back of the mouth and the lips moving.

And so schwa is the place we always come back to. So, if we have a word like amazing, that first syllable even though it's the letter A is not amazing, right? It's amazing. So, my hands right now as I'm talking to you I'm standing like a goal-- I actually used to play soccer or football



American foot-- well, American soccer, but I wasn't the goalie. But I'd watch the goalie and they'd sit in the center and they have their hands ready for the ball. They're just ready.

So, the ready is [pronunciation] and then here comes the ball. What word is it? Banana. So there's [pronunciation] or eleven, right? So, these are given all words that are da da da but it might not be. It might be canal c canal. So, all of these have this k or k you know this [pronunciation] sound and that's the schwa.

Ben: Right.

Karen: So, it's the reduction. It's this shorter time on vowel and it's more in the center resting area of the mouth and that allows us to create stress, right?

Ben: Interesting. Got you.

Karen: Like my good example would be if you hear-- if I say elementary. Elementary. What do you hear?



Ben: Yes, it takes a stretch to-- I know it should be a elementary, but there's--

Karen: It sounds like a lemon tree, right?

Ben: Got you, yes.

Karen: Yes. Elementary. It sounds like a lemon tree to me. Elementary. And yet that's-- I mean I was talking to a Spanish speaker, a mother in the school. I was at my child's school and this woman said elementary and I thought a lemon tree? Well, I wonder why we're talking about lemon trees just it was only like two seconds. It was very fast, but my mind went to this strange place.

Ben: Got you.

Karen: Elementary. Oh, elementary. And so that's how sensitized our brains are to where that stress is, right?

Ben: Yes, totally.



Karen: And you need the schwa to do that. Otherwise it's elementary and a lemon tree and elementary are only distinguishable because of schwa.

Ben: Right, right. So, it's like that kind of the punch-- the energy behind the punch maybe within the word.

Karen: Yes. I mean if we really want to talk about punches, you don't just have your hand here and then push it out. You actually come back first.

Ben: Yes.

Karen: You prepare for a good punch.

Ben: Yes.

Karen: Well, that's schwa.

Ben: Right. That's the energy behind it.



Karen: Yes, that's the unstressed and then you come forward for the stress and now you can really knock someone out.

Ben: With a lemon tree.

Karen: Under the lemon tree with the camel in the background.

Ben: Beautiful. All right and next pronunciation question. Could you explain weak forms and strong forms and is it necessary to understand these to speak English well?

Karen: I love this question because the first thing I would ask is well, exactly what do you mean by weak forms and strong forms? Because really these are terms that people can carry around maybe from one teacher or one book when I think I would say well, I think what you're really probably referring to is that there's this ebb and flow, right? There are bigger sounds and weaker sounds. And depending on what you're saying, a word might be in a position where it needs to be very strong-- it's strong form where it might be in a position of a weak form.



Ben: Got you, yes.

Karen: And so it really is about again, what is it we're trying to communicate? It's not-- this word is the word can, let's say. C-A-N, right? If it's at the beginning of a question, we'd say can you go? [pronunciation] and now it's schwa, right?

Ben: Right.

Karen: Can you go? And then the other person says yes, I can. No. You can't say yes, I can. And they say yes, I can.

Ben: Right.

Karen: Yes, I can. So, can is not just one pronunciation. There's the strong form and there's a weak form and we use it in the weak form at the beginning because we're preparing for the important information. Can you do it? Can you go? Can you think about it? The think, go, do is the important piece, but when the answer comes along, now can is the key part. Yes, I can.



Ben: Beautiful. So, it depends on the context really and depends on as you said before like what is it exactly that you're trying to communicate and which is the important component of the phrase or sentence.

Karen: Yes.

Ben: Beautiful. All right, final question. Could you tell us about your work and how it would help a student? I know you mentioned Blue Canoe before and the map with the color chart that we're going to include. Let's just maybe refresh that and how it would help a student.

Karen: Sure. Well, I'll go about that by telling a story which is when I first started my teaching career I was given-- I went to a university; University of Maryland. I got my first real full-time job as a teacher and the team gave me the least desired course of course because you give it to the new person and so that was a pronunciation course. People love teaching grammar or all these other things.



So, I got pronunciation and not just any pronunciation course. I got the course that is-- it was the high-stakes course that was determining whether a graduate student would be able to keep his or her fellowship to be a graduate teaching assistant. They had come from their countries to the United States to teach and to get their PhDs and suddenly, they realize oh they got their TOEFL scores really high, but they couldn't actually speak to an audience in a way that was comprehensible and so they were put into my course and had one semester; five months to improve enough to keep their fellowship and if they failed, it was terrible, right? Tears, a lot of tears. So, I was worried about that of course.

So, I started the semester September. This is 1999. I started the semester. I had these very diligent students. They were all scientists; political scientists as well as biological and chemistry all kinds of things. And they're very diligent, very methodical people because they were the types of people doing their PhDs.



And I'd come into class and I received a book from another teacher. They said this is the book and the book had some transcription. Lots of transcription exercises. Lots of IPA. Lots of phonetic symbols. So, the students would-- of course, they're doing many things. They'd be in class trying to catch up on their homework; doing transcription, being very methodical, very scientific, very mathematical about it really.

And I realized as I would work with them they were interested in improving, but their go-to was to look down at the words on the paper and transcribe and do their best to then render the transcription into better English and it left them thinking about the individual sounds, right?

Ben: Right.

Karen: And they'd struggle and struggle and so I broke free and I wanted them to get out of their heads and not think so much and to feel English. So, the work that I've done has been to simplify the focus of pronunciation improvement and so it's not to ignore. There are certainly moments where the difference between l and r is everything that you will find this. You will find



these small instances where some other little feature is the problem, but when you're talking about 80/20, 80% of or 90% of being understood is the music, the rhythm of English.

And you can get by so-- and not only is it about being understood. It's about sounding enough like the other person who's listening that they will accept you and trust you and give you their energy to do the other 20% work.

Ben: Got you.

Karen: Now, they're there to catch the other words and say oh, you mean canal or whatever the thing is. If you don't have that music, you won't gain their engagement and they will walk away or they will shut the door or--

Ben: Or fail the exam.

Karen: Fail the exam. Yes. I mean they have to care about you and so the work that I've done is really about gaining access to the emotional brain of the listener by speaking enough like them



by meeting their unconscious expectations of the rhythm of English, the music of English. That tells you I'm safe. This is good. I can listen to this person. I want to know what she's saying. I want to know what he has to say.

Ben: Right.

Karen: So again, Steve Jobs. He's holding the floor with his silence, but also then when he speaks you think oh, I can listen to this for a while.

Ben: Yes. Totally. Wow!

Karen: So, that's the work that I've done is just been finding these simple ways to reach students, help them relax about some of the smaller details, and understand the priorities of English.

Ben: Yes, this is so true. I totally believe in your philosophy because a lot of things can be simplified and I think as humans, we've got this tendency to over complicate and especially if



you're from a science background. There's a tendency there just to approach the study of a language or the study of English in this case the same way they would approach the study of an algorithm, for example and just breaking it down to the minute details and all of the-- whereas it can be simplified.

And again, I've seen this before when I started teaching English in Spain and the students all of them they had-- it was so common. It was called book English because all they'd ever done is study textbooks reading and writing. They'd never ever spoken the class, not even in an English class. The teacher would speak Spanish all day every day and the English they'd have to use and learn was all from a textbook and they would never ever speak it.

And I think it's a disastrous approach. I think they've changed it since then. This was about 10 years ago or so, but yes. Getting them out of that textbook mentality. I very much agree with your effort there, with your energy and the direction. So, that's fantastic.



Okay. So, we've come to the end of this tutorial podcast now. Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish, Karen?

Karen: I'll just add that I think for listeners who are out there wondering what to do, look for the joy that you can connect with with English. Look for those. Whether it's the music or some poetry or rap or something, but find what gives you joy in English and I'm sure you're going to find all of these principles in it because these are the essential features of English; everything we've talked about today.

So, it's not about the one thing. It's find your passion. Connect with it. Practice with it. And try to as much as these exams are coming at you give yourself these breaks of joy in the final days before you have an exam. And breathe and pause.

Ben: Beautiful advice there. Absolutely beautiful. I strongly agree and also you're setting yourself up to be a long-term learner if you're actually taking the time to make it enjoyable rather than just drilling or memorizing 30 irregular verbs every day. It's not going to-- you're not going



to be able to maintain that. So, I totally agree with what Karen is saying that just set yourself up and look for the enjoyment in the language.

This is especially for the students who've got their exam coming up in three months or in four months or if you know it's on the horizon. Set out a long-term approach and it's not just going to help you with your exam. It's going to help you along your language journey for a long time because if you're enjoying it, you're going to be doing it day in day out. You're much more likely to stick with it and repeat it and as we were saying before, repetition is the mother of all learning especially [unintelligible 00:47:54.10].

All right. So, thank you very much, Karen. That's been absolutely fantastic.

Karen: It's so fun talking to you.

[Music]

Female Voice: Thanks for listening to ieltpodcast.com

IELTS WRITING

How to use your time wisely
in the writing task

An illustration showing four people interacting with a large red clock. One person is sitting on the clock, another is pointing at it, and two others are standing nearby. The background is dark blue with white clouds and a laptop icon. A small circular logo with the text 'IELTS PODCAST' is in the bottom right corner of the illustration.