

Chatterbox #172 – Interview with Jenn Foote

Episode description

Are you self-conscious about your accent, or do you have trouble mimicking the speech patterns of native English speakers? In this week's episode, you can learn useful information and some great tips for practicing your spoken English from Dr. Jenn Foote, a specialist from the University of Alberta in English pronunciation.

Fun fact

Learning a second language is not only useful, but also grows grey matter! It has been a long-held belief that teaching children another language at an early age delays their language development. However, current research indicates that bilingual children reach milestones at around the same age as their peers, and speaking more than one language has cognitive benefits, possibly resulting in denser grey matter in areas of the brain associated with language.

Expressions included in the learning materials

- Shadowing
- A suprasegmental
- The takeaway
- Off the top of your head
- To bear with someone/something



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript.

Suzanne: Hey, everybody. My name is Suzanne, and you're listening to Culips.

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Suzanne: Today, we are very happy to talk with Jennifer Foote, or rather Dr. Jennifer Foote, from the University of Alberta. And we're going to speak to her today about her specialty, which is pronunciation in English and pronunciation research. Now, there were moments of this audio that weren't the best quality, so I apologize ahead of time for the quality of this recording. Just **bear with us** because there's some really great content. Here we go.

Hi, Jennifer.

Jennifer: Thank you for having me on your podcast.

Suzanne: Yes, welcome to Culips. So introduce yourself, Jenn.

Jennifer: My name is Jennifer Foote, and I'm an assistant professor at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Alberta, in Western Canada. And I study, for the most part, I study second-language pronunciation, and I look at ways that we can improve how teachers teach pronunciation and how people who are learning a second language can improve their pronunciation. And I also look at what it is about somebody's speech that makes it easy or difficult to understand.

Suzanne: I think that a lot of our listeners can relate to that. I think, even if we're a native speaker of English, we have been misunderstood, or have been told, "What? What? What? I didn't understand what you said? What exactly are you saying? Can you say it again?"

Jennifer: Absolutely. Yeah. I've certainly experienced that a number of times.

Suzanne: Yeah. And it doesn't have to be in your second language. It can also be in your first language, where, you know, sometimes even in a very noisy place, right? "What? What did you say?"

Jennifer: That's right. Or if somebody's talking about something and you don't really know the context very well or different first-language accents. I remember when I was younger, I was visiting a friend of mine in Ireland, and I was playing a game with her family that required you to answer a lot of questions very quickly. And every time they would ask me a question, I would just have to say, "pass, pass, pass" because I couldn't understand their accents. I wasn't familiar with their accents.

Suzanne: It can be difficult. You're right. There are many accents I don't understand as well, or it takes me time to acclimate, or get acquainted with, or get used to the accents of people.

Jennifer: That's just it. I think getting used to it ... Getting used to it and becoming more familiar definitely helps.

Suzanne: Yeah. So you work in pronunciation, and what are some things that have been very interesting to you, that you've discovered, or things that you might be working on currently in the research of understanding speech, of pronunciation?

Jennifer: When we talk about pronunciation, there are three main terms that we use when we talk about it, and the first one is *comprehensibility*. And *comprehensibility* is ... And I should say these aren't my terms, and I'm not the person who did the original, exciting research in these areas, but I'd like to talk about it anyway because I think it's helpful for people who are learning a language to understand. So *comprehensibility* is how easy or difficult somebody thinks that a speech sample, or a person, is to understand. So if you listen to somebody, or you listen to a speech, um, something that somebody says, and you think, "Oh, that was really hard to understand," then we'd say that it had low comprehensibility for that person.

Intelligibility is very similar. And *intelligibility* is how much you actually did understand because sometimes you might think something is difficult to understand, but you still can understand it if you try really hard. Or maybe you think it's easy to understand, but, actually, if you were asked to write down the words, actually, you didn't understand it. You thought it meant something different.

The third word is the one most people are the most familiar with, which is *accentedness*. And so an accent, to define it in a simple way, it's just how different somebody's speech seems from your own variety of that speech.

So, um, but what's interesting about the three constructs, there has been a lot of research in the past 20 years on these three ideas, especially by two researchers, Tracey Derwing and Murray Monroe, though lots of other people are doing research on these now. And they've found that, uh, a lot of people believe that, if you have a heavy accent, if your accent is perceived to be very strong, that that means that you will be less comprehensible and less intelligible, or you will be difficult to understand, but that's not necessarily the case.

So they've found, in studies where people are rating people's speech, they found that, well, if somebody is rated as hard to understand, or their intelligibility is low, then often they will also have a strong accent. But the reverse isn't always true; you can have a very noticeable accent, but still be very easy to understand. And I think we can think of lots of examples of people, of actors and whatnot, who have very noticeable accents, but who are easy to understand. And so there's nothing at all wrong with having an accent. It's a natural part of learning the language. And so what I tend to focus on then is, if somebody's accent ... If there's something about a person's pronunciation or accent that does make it difficult to understand, that that's what you should focus on. But that just having an accent is fine. It's great.

Suzanne: Yeah. So that's really interesting because some of our listeners, most of our listeners, are maybe not native speakers of English. They're learning English. And so what would be **the takeaway** from this that you can tell learners, in this case, that may be, might be, worried about their accent?

Jennifer: Well, I would say, first of all, it's very unlikely, it's very uncommon—and we know this from a lot of research—for someone who learns a language as an adult to get rid of a foreign accent or to lose all traces of an accent. It's very difficult to do, and so if that's your goal, it's very likely that you'll feel disappointed. But that it's not necessary because what you want is to have speech that people find easy to understand. And if there is something about your pronunciation that is making your speech hard to understand, we also know that it's possible to improve that and to make changes to pronunciation.

And so I think **the takeaway** message would be is to not worry necessarily ... Don't worry if you have an accent. That's a normal part of learning a second language. And if there is something about your speech that you think, where you find, people often are having trouble understanding you, try to find out. Maybe ask a teacher, or try to find out what it is about your speech that's actually causing difficulties. And don't think, oh, I need to sound just like a native speaker because you don't. But focusing on specific things that might be causing you problems, you can change those with effort.

- Suzanne: That's great. That's great. And, just **off the top of your head**, what are some common things that people can change, like aspects of speech that are really common, that when people make a change, like it can really help them to be more understandable?
- Jennifer: Right. So depending on what your language background is and your individual differences, different people will have challenges with different segments. And ... But an important thing to think about, when you're talking about segments, is that some of them matter more than others.
- Suzanne: Today, actually, I was working with a student who is doing a film in English. She is from Montreal. And the name of the movie she is doing is called *Dispatcher*, and it's spelled d-i-s-p-a-t-c-h-e-r, and she was saying, "Dispatcher, dispatch, dispatch." And really making the *P* very airy, or we would call it using a lot of plosive, using a lot of *puh puh*, air that comes out after you make the stop of your lips, and then you *puh*, pop it out. And I told her, in the case of it being after an *S*, it actually is going to sound more like a *B*—*dispatch*. So that would be something that we were focusing on a segment, right?
- Jennifer: Right. Some of them do more work in the language, we could say, so for example ... And the research term for that is *functional load*, but you really don't need to memorize the term. But an example would be a vowel contrast, like *ee* versus *eh*. So if you said *peat* instead of *pit*, that's a contrast. We have fewer vowels in English than we have consonants, and those are highly occurring vowels. Where if you struggle with those two sounds, that's something worth putting time into fixing because there's a lot of instances where it's possible that a misunderstanding could occur.
- Suzanne: Sure. Because if I say *pit* and I meant *peat*, it's totally changing the meaning.
- Jennifer: Right. And often it's fine anyway because of context, right, so we know what you're trying to say, but it's more likely to cause a problem. Whereas, let's say you take the *T-H* sound, *th*, and then in English, we actually have two *T-H* sounds, one is the *th* and one is *the*. You can see it's a very subtle difference. And those two sounds never, or almost never, I should say, distinguish meaning in English. And so if you're accidentally saying them slightly off, it's very unlikely that that's going to cause anyone to misunderstand what you're saying. And so I would say, it would be less important to put effort on that sound.
- Suzanne: Absolutely. Because many times, even native speakers don't actually say *th* and *the*, right?

- Jennifer: That's right. And there's ... Depending on where a person is from as a native English speaker, there's a lot of variation in that. Some people often will substitute. Even native speakers will use a *duh* sound instead of a *T-H*, *the*, sound, for example.
- Suzanne: Or I've heard even an *F* or a *V*, like my *bruva*.
- Jennifer: Right, exactly. That would be more, like, in certain British dialects especially. Yeah.
- Suzanne: So even native speakers don't always use *T-H*. And I actually have heard in class that *T-H* sound, though so many people really try to acquire it, and get it right. It's really ... Even for kids learning their first language, it's usually the last sound they'll ever learn.
- Jennifer: That's right. Yeah, that's right, I would say. And I don't study child language acquisition so much, but definitely, I've noticed that that's a sound that little children that I know seem to struggle with the most.
- Suzanne: Yeah.
- Jennifer: I was just going to talk briefly, though, about **suprasegmentals**. So, **suprasegmentals**, those are things that go above an individual sound. So, for example, stress, and that can be at a word or sentence level. So if you say "computer," then the stress is on the second syllable. You can hear *computer*. But if you put the stress on the first syllable, *computer*, then, even though in a sense you're not making mistakes with the sounds, the word can be difficult to understand. And also the rhythm of a sentence, which words get more emphasis. And finally, intonation, which is like the melody of English. These all have important information as well. And so often, if someone hasn't taken a pronunciation class, and they're just learning on their own, those are things that are less noticeable. It's really easy to think, "Oh, I think I mistook the *puh* and *buh* sounds." But it's less obvious to notice that maybe the melody of my speech, or my *intonation*, isn't like a native speaker's. And so those can be really good things to pay attention to. And a good technique for that, if you don't have an instructor and you're not sure, is to record yourself, which is easy now, right? Everyone has smartphones. And listen to your own speech, and see how that can sometimes help you hear it a little bit more objectively.
- Suzanne: That's really a great idea. And I think watching TV shows that you really like, like *How I Met Your Mother*, or things that you can easily get on Netflix. Watch it trying to listen to stress, you know, and really see Barney or something making a word longer or higher pitched, or something like that. They're really emphasizing a word or a sound.

- Jennifer: That's actually really good advice, listening to TV shows. And one thing you can do, actually, combining what you said about TV shows, or podcasts—podcasts are great—and what I said about recording, something that I have my students do, who are learning pronunciation, is an activity called **shadowing**, where you take a speech model off—and I often use sitcoms—and you copy the actors as closely as you can. And then you can listen to your recording of yourself and the recording of the actor, and you can compare and see where the differences are. And that can be ... And even without recording, that can be a useful activity. But I've done research on **shadowing**, and it shows a lot of promise for helping make speech more comprehensible.
- Suzanne: That's really a great idea, and it's almost like TV-show karaoke.
- Jennifer: It is, yeah. It is. I actually think **shadowing** can be a lot of fun.
- Suzanne: Yeah, and it is like a kind of mimicking, a form of mimic or ...
- Jennifer: It is.
- Suzanne: I guess, where you are copying the ... And it's fun because you can also copy the actor and the persona, and feel like you're in the show.
- Jennifer: Well, and that's what I suggest that students do as well. Don't just say the words because that won't help you so much. But really try to be that character. Try to copy them exactly.
- Suzanne: Yeah.
- Jennifer: And that can be ... And it can be a very helpful technique.
- Suzanne: That's really great. This is such good advice. Well, thank you so much, Dr. Foote. Thank you so much for all of your insight, and we look forward to hearing more about your research, maybe down the road sometime, checking back in with you. And really, thank you so much for letting us know that the way we speak, as long as our message is being understood, is absolutely A-OK.
- Jennifer: Thank you very much. It was a pleasure being on your show.
- Suzanne: Well, folks, that's all she wrote. It was great catching up and talking with Dr. Jennifer Foote about pronunciation. It was so informative. I hope you guys enjoyed it too. Check us out on our website at Culips.com. It's the place you can learn all about Culips, and it's the place where you can sign up to be a Culips member and receive all kinds of great stuff, like transcripts of our podcasts and more learning materials. We'll be back soon with another Culips episode. See you soon. Bye.

Detailed Explanations

Shadowing

Shadowing is a language learning technique that involves a learner repeating or mimicking a model speaker. While listening to the model speaker, the learner tries to copy or approximate the speech of the model speaker immediately after hearing it. In this technique, the learner not only mimics the words, but also mimics the stress, intonation, and emotionality of the model speaker.

Shadowing is a great technique for learning the speech patterns of native English speakers. The more often that you practice this technique, the better you will get at emulating the sounds of speech.

Try the following **shadowing** exercise at home:

1. Choose a recorded TV show or movie in English, and find the remote.
2. Watch your show or movie with your finger on the pause button of the remote (pausing the show or movie where appropriate).
3. Choose a character or an actor in the movie to mimic.
4. Try to speak slightly after your chosen character, and attempt to copy their affect, intonation, stress, and pronunciation.
5. Pay attention to your speech. What do you notice?

A suprasegmental

Vowels and consonants are segments of speech. When put together, they form a syllable. Features that accompany the utterance of vowels and consonants are called **suprasegmentals**. So the term **suprasegmentals** is used to describe significant features of speech, such as word stress and intonation, or the parts of pronunciation that do not have to do with the individual sounds of consonants or vowels.

In speech, *stress* means the emphasis that is placed on certain syllables or on certain words in a sentence. In other words, when we stress a syllable or word, we accentuate the sound of that syllable or word by making it longer, clearer, and louder than the other syllables or words.

Intonation means the rise and fall of the voice when speaking, so how we say things. Intonation is an essential part of speech, as it is how we indicate meaning and emotion. Changing the intonation of a phrase could change its meaning. For example, saying “it’s snowing” in a high-pitched and excited voice indicates happiness, whereas saying “it’s snowing” in a low-pitched and flat voice indicates unhappiness.

Try the following **suprasegmental** exercises at home:

Word stress

1. Grab a rubber band, and turn on your favourite English-speaking TV show.
3. When you hear a word with more than one syllable, pause the TV show, and listen again.
4. Try the word out for yourself. When you hear a stressed syllable, pull the rubber band. When you hear an unstressed syllable, let the rubber band go lax.
5. Try a few more words, using the rubber band to feel the expansion and contraction of each syllable.

Intonation

1. Listen to your favourite Culips Simplified Speech episode.
2. When you hear the speakers’ intonation rise or go up, bring your arm up. When you hear their intonation fall or go down, bring your arm down.
3. Now, repeat this exercise, but pay attention to the different types of questions—yes/no questions and open-ended questions. How does the intonation change?

The takeaway

The expression **the takeaway** means the main message, or most important fact or piece of information to be retained. In other words, it is the key point or idea of a discussion, meeting, article, or book.

In this episode, after discussing accents, Suzanne asks Jenn what **the takeaway** would be for people learning English who are worried about their accent. In other words, Suzanne asks Jenn what the most important fact or message about accents is that the listeners should remember. In this case, **the takeaway** is that you should not worry too much about trying to get rid of your accent. Instead, focus on specific things that might be a barrier to being understood.

Here are a couple more examples with **the takeaway**:

Tara:	I just read this really cool article on modern office design. You should read it!
Nick:	I don't have time to read it. I'm really busy right now.
Tara:	Come on! I think you'll find it really interesting.
Nick:	Can't you just give me the takeaway ?
Tara:	Fine, but I really think that you should read the whole article.

Francesca:	Oh no! If I don't leave soon, I'm going to miss the company-wide meeting.
Ike:	What's the meeting about?
Francesca:	I'm not sure. Usually, they're pretty long and boring, and my boss only gets to the takeaway at the very end.

Off the top of your head

Off the top of your head is an idiom with two meanings: to relay information based on a guess or what you remember, and to relay information with little or no preparation (impromptu). Both meanings involve someone making a statement without checking their facts.

Often, we use **off the top of your head** in a question or in response to a question. In this episode, Jenn is asked to list **off the top of her head** things that people can change to make their speech more understandable. So Jenn is being asked to list things that she can easily remember without preparation. If someone were to ask, "What is the capital of the province of British Columbia?" and you answer "Vancouver" because it's the only city you can think of in British Columbia, you would be answering **off the top of your head**. In reality, the capital of British Columbia is Victoria, but Vancouver is a good guess to **make off the top of your head**.

The expression **off the top of your head** can also be used to describe something that is done in a spontaneous or unplanned way. For example, if you sit down and write without any preparation or planning, you are writing **off the top of your head**.

Be careful: **Off the top of your head** is not an adjective. It cannot be used as a synonym for *impromptu* or *spontaneous*.

Here are a couple more examples with **off the top of your head**:

Neil:	I love your singing voice. Could you sing me a song?
Sarah:	Right now?
Neil:	Yeah, just do it off the top of your head . Make it up as you go along.

Terry:	What time does the corner store close?
Amy:	Hmm, off the top of my head , I think it closes at 10:00 p.m. I could be wrong, but I seem to remember that I went there one night after 9:00 p.m.
Terry:	I'll call and ask.

To bear with someone/something

To bear with someone or **to bear with something** is a phrasal verb that means to be patient. You can use **to bear with** in relation to either someone or something.

If you are asked **to bear with someone**, you are being asked to be understanding and wait for that person to finish what they are doing or saying. For instance, if you go to see your doctor, and he is unable to find your chart, he might say, “**Can you bear with me** while I look for your chart?”

If you are asked **to bear with something**, you are being asked to be patient with something when it is difficult. In other words, **to bear with something** can be used to encourage someone to persevere at something. For instance, if your partner is watching your favourite movie for the first time, and the beginning is very boring, to encourage them to keep watching, you could say, “**Bear with the movie**; it gets a lot better as it goes on.”

Here are a couple more examples with **to bear with someone/something**:

Noah:	Hey Kate. You look down. What's the matter?
Kate:	My boyfriend and I had a huge fight last night. I don't know if we should stay together anymore.
Noah:	I'm sorry to hear that. Has anything changed in his life lately?
Kate:	Well, I know he's been really stressed about work, and his favourite aunt is ill.
Noah:	It sounds like he's going through a bad time right now. Maybe you should bear with him and see if things get better in the next couple of months.
Kate:	Maybe you're right. I'll try to be more patient with him.

Allen:	I hate calculus! I don't understand a thing.
Jamie:	It's only the first week of school.
Allen:	I know, but I just don't get it. I've been studying for hours, and I haven't made any progress.
Jamie:	You always used to love math. You should bear with it! I'm sure that you just need a bit more time to figure it out.

Quiz

1. What does *the takeaway* mean?

- a) the last paragraph
- b) the introduction
- c) the last sentence
- d) the main message

2. Which of the following is NOT a suprasegmental?

- a) word stress
- b) vowel sounds
- c) intonation
- d) sentence stress

3. In the context of language learning, what is shadowing?

- a) copying someone's movements
- b) copying someone's gait
- c) copying someone's speech
- d) translating a conversation in real time

4. To bear with someone or something is to be _____.

- a) lazy
- b) patient
- c) passive
- d) bored

5. True or false: *Off the top of your head* is an adjective.

- a) true
- b) false

Quiz Answers

1. d 2. b 3. c 4. b 5. b

Episode credits

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