

TEN SUGGESTIONS ON LEARNING TO SPEAK ENGLISH

Gordon H. Allison, B.A. (Languages)

(Lecturer in English at Thammasat University)

We know very well the problems involved in learning to speak any foreign language effectively; indeed, it is difficult enough simply to learn to speak one's own native language effectively. Nevertheless, we feel that perhaps we can help some Thai students of English in some small way to be able to use English more successfully than they have in the past.

First of all, let us say frankly that we do not believe there is any "easy" way to learn a foreign language. (That is rather like "looking for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow".) Most people who learn a foreign language also want to be able, eventually, to speak it effectively. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to learn to speak a foreign language by doing nothing more than speaking it. First we must learn how to read the foreign language, to understand it when it is spoken by others, to write it at least a little bit, and to understand why sentences are constructed as they are.

Of course we can always find people who have learned to speak a foreign language simply by speaking and listening (such as a child growing up among foreigners or an adult working many years with foreigners). However, if such people do not also learn how to read and write the language and how to understand the construction of it, it is likely that they will never be able to speak the language really well, for they are simply speaking as parrots do: repeating only what they have heard others say.

Therefore, you will agree, we believe, that some background in the written language is indispensable for someone who wants eventually to be able to speak it well.

Here is some of the advice we usually give to Thai students asking how they can learn to speak English effectively :-

- 1) Read as much English as you can, but try to find things to read that you can understand and that are interesting to you. The best way to learn and remember new words to use in speaking is to see them many times in your reading. This is how one builds up his *vocabulary*.
- 2) Try to understand the English you read without translating it into Thai, as much as you can. This will help you eventually to be able to "think" in English, for it is obvious that one does not have time to translate from one language to another in the course of a normal conversation.
- 3) Get in the habit of using all-English dictionaries as much as possible. When you do not understand a certain English word, first try to guess (using logic) at the meaning, by paying close attention to the other words in the same sentence (the context). In many cases, you can guess correctly the meaning of a new word in this way and save yourself the trouble of looking in the dictionary. However, if you are still doubtful or unclear about the meaning of the word, then look first of all in an all-English dictionary. Try to understand the meaning of the word as it is explained in other English words. Finally, if you still cannot understand, then you should use a bilingual (English-Thai) dictionary. Bear in mind, however, that it is dangerous to get in the habit of relying too much on bilingual dictionaries. In many cases the translations are not exactly correct (because there are so many different possibilities for a large number of words in English). Also, using bilingual dictionaries too much will make it difficult for you ever to be able to "think" in English.

4) Listen to spoken English whenever you can, in motion picture theatres, on the radio, from phonograph records, etc. Try to force yourself to understand as much as possible without translating into Thai in your head. If you do mentally translate into Thai, you will not be able to keep up with the speaker, in most cases. You must train yourself gradually to be able to understand the meaning of English words as soon as you hear them, without associating them in your mind with their Thai translations.

5) Write in English whenever you can, even if you do make many mistakes. This helps you remember English words better. Use an all-English dictionary as much as possible to help you spell correctly. It is of course very helpful if you have someone to correct your mistakes for you, but remember that most teachers do not have time to correct all the mistakes of all their students. Try to learn how to see your own mistakes and to learn from the mistakes of others.

6) Speak English whenever you can. Do not be afraid of making mistakes, and do not waste too much time trying to decide which tense to use, etc. Practice makes perfect, it is said, and this is certainly true in learning to speak a foreign language. We don't believe there is anyone in this world who has learned to speak a foreign language well without first making many mistakes in it. But the secret is to "learn from one's mistakes". If you speak English with a foreigner, remember that he wants to know what you have on your mind; he is not interested in counting the mistakes you make. Never hesitate to say something interesting to a foreigner in English simply because you are afraid you will make a mistake. Say what's on your mind. That's the best way to learn how to speak English effectively. Remember that the purpose of a language is to communicate our thoughts to others.

7) Even if you very rarely or never (not yet anyway) have the chance to speak English with a foreigner, this does not mean that

&&

you can never say English words. Practice reading conversational English as if you were speaking it. Try to speak some English with your friends who are interested in it (but don't be forever trying to laugh at the mistakes your friends make).

8) Do not forget grammar. Many Thai students unfortunately have a strong dislike for grammar because they have studied it for so many years but still probably do not understand it very well. Grammar is not something that was invented simply to make a language difficult and troublesome for everyone. Without grammatical rules, the purpose of a language would soon be lost, for people would not be able to communicate clearly their thoughts to others: because eventually everyone would speak as he pleased. Remember that the purpose of grammar is to *help* us express our ideas clearly in a language. Nevertheless, you should not spend *all* your time on grammar. We have seen some students who think they know English well simply because they know something about grammar that other students don't know. For people who want to speak English effectively, it is necessary to be able to put our knowledge of grammar to use in speech. What good does it do (in real life) to know grammatical rules that went out of fashion many years ago? Try to learn and understand *useful* grammatical rules. This will help you very much to be able to speak English effectively.

9) Above all, be tolerant of your fellow students and your teachers when they make mistakes in English. It has always seemed to us that some students in Thailand study English only in order to be able to laugh at other students or at teachers who make mistakes in speaking English. Remember that there are very few people in this world (perhaps none) who *never* make mistakes in speaking English (even people who have been speaking it as their native language for many years).

10) Last but not least, be tolerant of your own mistakes in English. Realize that you must make mistakes in order to learn. The important thing is to "learn" from your mistakes. (Don't go on making the same mistake over and over again, however, once you have learned better.) And do not be discouraged if your progress in the language sometimes seems slow.

In conclusion, if you will really try to follow the advice we have given you in these 10 points, we feel sure that you cannot help but make steady progress.

P.S. *We don't think you should overly concern yourself about your accent and whether your "intonation" is just right. Although some teachers would probably disagree with us, it is our contention that the study of English "intonation" is not very practical or profitable for the majority of foreign students of English. Remember again that the purpose of English or any other language is to be able to communicate our thoughts to someone else. Few people speaking a language that is not their native one can ever hope to speak it so well that others will take them for a "native speaker" of the language.....but what difference does that make! As a matter of fact, we rather enjoy listening to English spoken with a slight foreign accent.*