

# Learner English

A teacher's guide to interference  
and other problems

Edited by Michael Swan &  
Bernard Smith

**SECOND EDITION**

**Cambridge  
Handbooks  
for Language  
Teachers**

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# Learner English

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*A teacher's guide to  
interference and other problems*

Michael Swan and Bernard Smith

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**Learner English**

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# Introduction

## Purpose and scope of the book

This book is a practical reference guide for teachers of English as a foreign language. It is meant to help teachers to anticipate the characteristic difficulties of learners of English who speak particular mother tongues, and to understand how these difficulties arise.

It is obviously only possible, in a work of this kind, to give an outline account of the problems of the speakers of a few of the world's many languages. We hope, however, that in the twenty-two chapters that follow many teachers will find information that is useful to them. Since the book is designed primarily for teachers of British English, the selection is biased slightly towards the problems of those students that British teachers most often find themselves teaching. Teachers of other varieties should, however, also find much that is relevant to their purposes.

Most of the chapters discuss the typical 'interlanguage' of speakers of a particular mother tongue. (By 'interlanguage' we mean the variety of a language that is produced by non-native learners.) In some cases (Swahili, Hindi, Tamil), the language focused on can be taken as broadly representative of a whole group, in that speakers of related languages are likely to share a number of the problems described. In two chapters (those on West African and Scandinavian learners), the description relates to the English of speakers of a whole group of languages.

The book is accompanied by a cassette and a CD with recordings of learners, illustrating some of the pronunciation problems described in the various chapters.

## Approach

The book is written especially for the practising non-specialist teacher who needs an introduction to the characteristic problems of a particular group of learners. Technical linguistic terminology has been kept to a minimum, and contributors have in general aimed at producing clear simple descriptions of usage rather than detailed scholarly studies. This



is particularly the case in the area of pronunciation, where excessive technical detail can be confusing and counterproductive for the non-specialist. Within these limits, however, we believe that the descriptions given here are valid and reasonably comprehensive.

## **British and other varieties of English**

Learners' problems are described in terms of the way their typical 'interlanguages' deviate from a standard British variety of English. (This choice implies no value judgement.) Not all the comparisons are valid for other types of English, especially those relating to pronunciation, and forms that are 'incorrect' in one variety may be correct in another. Teachers of American, Australian or other non-British varieties will therefore need to be selective in their use of the information given here. (There is a note on pages xii–xiii for teachers of American English.) Teachers working in regions which have their own established forms of second-language English, such as India, West Africa or Singapore, need to be especially careful in this respect. A particular 'typical mistake' (seen through British eyes) may be a perfectly normal and acceptable form in the local standard, and the question of whether to correct it may not be a straightforward one for a teacher.

## **Editorial conventions**

In the 'distribution' sections, capitals are used for the names of countries in which the language concerned has official or quasi-official status at the time of publication. Lower case letters are used for other countries in which substantial numbers of native speakers of the language may be found. Thus the distribution of Italian is given as: ITALY, REPUBLIC OF SAN MARINO, VATICAN, SWITZERLAND, Malta, Somalia.

Pronunciation is shown by the use of common phonetic symbols between slashes, thus: /ðʌs/. These necessarily provide rough guides only; the context should make it clear whether the transcription is intended to represent a correct English pronunciation, a characteristic learner's mistake, or a sound in a foreign language.

Except in the sections on pronunciation, an unacceptable or doubtfully acceptable form or usage is preceded by an asterisk (\*).

All foreign words are printed in a different typeface: e.g. *autorzy*.

## Errors and the mother tongue

There is less disagreement than there used to be about how far interlanguages are influenced by learners' native languages, and most linguists would probably now agree that the mother tongue can affect learners' English in several ways.

1. Where the mother tongue has no close equivalent for a feature, learners are likely to have particular problems in the relevant area. Japanese or Russian students, for example, whose languages have no article systems, have a great deal of difficulty with English articles.
2. Where the mother tongue does have an equivalent feature, learning is in general facilitated. French- or German-speaking students, for instance, find English articles relatively easy in most respects, despite the complexity of the system.
3. However, equivalences are rarely exact, and so-called 'interference' or 'transfer' mistakes are common where students assume a more complete correspondence than exists, so that they carry over mother-tongue patterns in cases where English forms or uses are not in fact parallel. French- or German-speaking students typically make certain mistakes in English (e.g. *\*The life is hard*, *\*My sister is hairdresser*) precisely because their languages do have article systems.
4. Since transfer mistakes arise where the systems of two languages are similar but not identical, they are most common (at least as far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned) in the interlanguage of students who speak languages closely related to English. Speakers of unrelated languages such as Chinese or Arabic have fewer problems with transfer, and correspondingly more which arise from the intrinsic difficulty of the English structures themselves.

A learner's English is therefore likely to carry the signature of his/her mother tongue, by virtue both of what goes wrong and of what does not. This is most striking in the case of pronunciation, where the phonological structure of a speaker's first language and the associated 'articulatory setting' of the lips, tongue, jaw, etc. usually affect his or her English speech quite strongly, giving rise to what we call, for example, a Dutch, Turkish or Chinese 'accent'. But vocabulary, syntax, discourse structure, handwriting and all other aspects of language use are also likely to some extent to carry a mother-tongue 'accent'. While not all of a learner's problems, by any means, are attributable to direct mother-tongue 'interference', the overall patterns of error do therefore tend to be language-specific – so that it makes sense to talk about 'Thai English', 'Japanese English', 'Greek English' and so on. To characterise these various kinds of English is the concern of the contributors to this book.

# Note for teachers of American English<sup>1</sup>

## Pronunciation

The British vowel charts given in some of the chapters will appear complicated to Americans. This is mainly because of the diphthongs (/eə/, /ɪə/ etc.) which have replaced vowel + *r* in standard British English.

British English also has an ‘extra’ pure vowel as compared with American English. This is the rounded short *o* (/ɒ/) used in words like *dog*, *cot*, *gone*. (*Cot* and *cart* have quite different vowels in British English, whereas in American English the main difference is the absence or presence of an *r* sound.)

Many words written with *a* + consonant (e.g. *fast*, *after*) are pronounced with /ɑ:/ (as in *father*) in standard southern British English, while American and most other varieties of English have /æ/.

Because of differences between British and American pronunciation, some of the ‘mistakes’ described in the various chapters may not be mistakes if American English is the target variety. Note in particular:

1. The standard British vowel /əʊ/ (as in *boat*, *home*) is rather different from the American equivalent. Some learners’ approximations are wrong in British English but acceptable in American English.
2. Faulty pronunciations of British /ɒ/ (as in *dog*, *cot*, see above) may sound all right in American English.
3. Pronunciation of *r* after a vowel (as in *turn*, *before*, *car*) is a common mistake among learners of British English. It is of course perfectly correct in American English if the *r* is correctly articulated.
4. Some learners pronounce a flapped intervocalic /t/ (close to a /d/) in words like *better*, *matter*. Again, this produces a mistake in British English but an acceptable American pronunciation.

<sup>1</sup> In compiling these notes, we have been greatly helped by information supplied by Professor J. Donald Bowen and Professor Randall L. Jones.

## Grammar

There are few differences between British and American English grammar, and almost all of the descriptions of learners' grammar problems are valid for both varieties. Note, however:

1. The present perfect is used in British English in some cases where Americans prefer a past tense (e.g. *He's just gone out* / *He just went out*; *I've already paid* / *I already paid*). This can lead to differences in the acceptability of learner usage depending on which is the target variety.
2. Pre-verb adverbs are often placed later in the verb phrase in British English than in American English (e.g. *He would probably have agreed* / *He probably would have agreed*). Again, this can mean that a 'mistake' in British English is a correct American form.

## Spelling, punctuation and vocabulary

The problems described in these areas, with very few exceptions, are common to learners of both varieties of English.

# List of phonetic symbols

The following symbols are used in the book to represent either the English sounds shown, or reasonably close equivalents in other languages.

## vowels

/i:/	as in 'peat' /pi:t/	/eɪ/	as in 'bay' /beɪ/
/ɪ/	as in 'pit' /pɪt/	/aɪ/	as in 'buy' /baɪ/
/e/	as in 'pet' /pet/	/ɔɪ/	as in 'boy' /bɔɪ/
/æ/	as in 'pat' /pæt/	/əʊ/	as in 'go' /gəʊ/
/ɑ:/	as in 'part' /pɑ:t/	/aʊ/	as in 'cow' /kaʊ/
/ɒ/	as in 'pot' /pɒt/		
/ɔ:/	as in 'port' /pɔ:t/	/ɪə/	as in 'hear' /hɪə/
/ʊ/	as in 'put' /pʊt/	/eə/	as in 'hair' /heə/
/u:/	as in 'poodle' /pu:dl/	/ʊə/	as in 'tour' /tuə/
/ʌ/	as in 'putt' /pʌt/		
/ɜ:/	as in 'pert' /pɜ:t/		
/ə/	as in 'about', 'upper'		
	/əbaʊt/, /ʌpə/		

## consonants

/p/	as in 'pea' /pi:/	/m/	as in 'map' /mæp/
/b/	as in 'bee' /bi:/	/n/	as in 'nap' /næp/
/t/	as in 'toe' /təʊ/	/ŋ/	as in 'hang' /hæŋ/
/d/	as in 'doe' /dəʊ/	/l/	as in 'led' /led/
/tʃ/	as in 'chin' /tʃɪn/	/r/	as in 'red' /red/
/dʒ/	as in 'gin' /dʒɪn/	/j/	as in 'yes' /jes/
/k/	as in 'cap' /kæp/	/w/	as in 'west' /west/
/g/	as in 'gap' /gæp/	/h/	as in 'head' /hed/
/f/	as in 'fat' /fæt/		
/v/	as in 'vat' /væt/		
/θ/	as in 'thing' /θɪŋ/		
/ð/	as in 'this' /ðɪs/		
/s/	as in 'sip' /sɪp/		
/z/	as in 'zip' /zɪp/		
/ʃ/	as in 'ship' /ʃɪp/		
/ʒ/	as in 'measure' /meʒə/		

**stress**

/ˈ/ /,/      primary and secondary stress, as in ‘entertainment’  
/,entəˈteɪnmənt/

**other symbols**

/ɸ/      an *f* made with both lips instead of teeth and lip  
/β/      a *v* made with both lips instead of teeth and lip  
/ç/      like the *h* in *huge*, or the *ch* in German *ich*  
/x/      like the *ch* in Scottish *loch* or German *ach*  
/ɣ/      like /x/, but voiced.  
/?/      glottal stop (like a light cough, or the cockney *t* in *butter*)  
/ʌ/      like the vowel in *too*, but with no lip-rounding  
/o/      a pure ‘o’, as in Scottish or Irish *rose*  
/~/      nasalisation of a vowel

Some other symbols used in particular chapters are explained in the text.

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# Dutch speakers

Guy A. J. Tops, Xavier Dekeyser, Betty Devriendt  
and Steven Geukens

## Distribution

THE NETHERLANDS, BELGIUM, Surinam, Dutch Antilles; about 20 million people. (Its mutually intelligible descendant Afrikaans, spoken by about 6 million native speakers and used as a *lingua franca* by about 15 million people in South Africa and Namibia, is now officially considered a separate language.)

## Introduction

Dutch is a member of the (West) Germanic branch of Indo-European, and as such is closely related to Frisian, English, German and the Scandinavian languages. It is the standard language in the Netherlands and in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, where it is often but unofficially called 'Flemish'. The use of the standard language as the first language is far more widespread in the Netherlands than in Flanders. There most people habitually use one of the many local dialects or an approximation of the standard language. The variation, though diminishing, is still very great. The standard language is understood almost everywhere, but dialects tend to be mutually unintelligible, both in the Netherlands and in Flanders.

Dutch and English being so closely related, they have many similarities in all areas of their grammars, and Dutch speakers regard English as easy to learn, at least initially, when they make rapid progress.

## Phonology

### General

The Dutch and English phonological systems are broadly similar, so that speakers of Dutch do not normally have serious difficulties in recognising or pronouncing most English sounds.

Many learners may use strong regional accents in their Dutch, and