

Speaking English on the Telephone – How to help your learner succeed!

Conversing on the phone is an advanced level skill for a language learner. It requires listening to detailed information without visual context and being able to respond clearly so the other party can understand. Speaking English on the phone is a necessity of life for an immigrant, but learners often express that they are nervous about placing or answering calls. The poor quality of cell phone connections in today's on-the-go world is an added stress. Consider focused practice to help your learner build confidence and ease with using the phone. Slowly but surely, with practice, your learner will feel more prepared to take on this task.

As with any study topic, first start by asking goal setting questions to find out what is relevant to your learner's life. Brainstorm a list with your learner that will guide your work together. If you have a phone book on hand this might be a good prop to get your learner talking about who they may need to call. The following list of questions provides a jumping off point for a discussion with your learner.

- Who do you need to call on the telephone?
- Who calls you?
- Do you need to use the phone at work? If so, when and with whom?
- What types of personal calls do you make?
- What do you need to be able to say to friends on the phone?
- Do you need to call businesses? Why? Provide possible examples:
 - To order food for take out?
 - To ask about an issue with a utility bill?
 - To schedule a medical appointment?
 - To refill a prescription at the pharmacy?
- Do you have difficulty understanding voicemail messages that people leave for you?
- Do you have difficulty when you call a business and instead of a receptionist you get a pre-recorded message with a menu of options? Do you remember an example of when this happened?

Ideas for a Sample Lesson

1. Next practice writing a sample dialog with the learner based on one of the scenarios from your list. Practice key vocabulary and repeat the dialog together multiple times.
2. After your learner feels more confident with the scripted dialog, practice an unscripted role-play based on the same topic. This will challenge your learner and give you ideas about what additional skills to practice in upcoming lessons.
3. Then practice the telephone roleplay sitting back to back (not facing each other) to simulate a phone conversation by taking away visual cues. This can help a student build confidence in a safe environment.

Additional tips for telephone tutoring:

- Practice common phrases that are required in phone conversations, such as, introducing yourself, asking for someone, taking a message. The following website has some great starter ideas.
http://esl.about.com/od/businessspeakingkills/a/t_vocab.htm
- It might also be helpful to discuss strategies that would help the learner to know how to act when there is a misunderstanding during a conversation on the phone. For example: "Could you please speak slowly, I am learning English". For more tips see the following website:
http://esl.about.com/od/businessspeakingkills/a/t_tips.htm
- Practice common personal information that the learner might need to communicate. Have them practice saying their phone number or spelling their name slowly and clearly until they feel more confident that they will be understood. If certain letters or numbers are difficult for a learner to pronounce, practice having them repeat once, and then restate in a different way. For example if the learner has difficulty saying number 50, have them practice saying it both ways – "fifty" or "five zero". For spelling practice using the phonetic alphabet as a tool "I spell my name Z-A-F-A. That's Z as in zebra, A as in Alpha..." etc.
- Have your learner practice leaving a message so they will be less likely to be nervous when they are on an actual call. Talk about what is important to leave in a message such as full name and phone number. Have them practice repeating their phone number slowly two times on a message to be sure that it can be understood. For other tips about leaving a message:
http://esl.about.com/od/businessspeakingkills/a/t_message.htm

Additional tips for telephone tutoring (continued):

- Practice calling and listening to recorded messages and menu of options from local businesses. For example, have your learner call the public library or a store that you know have a recorded message like this. Assign the learner a task to navigate the system to find out business hours or another piece of information and then report back to you.
- Another tip to share with your learner to help them feel more confident when an important topic is discussed over the phone is to have the learner request that the individual that they are speaking to send written confirmation of what was discussed by mail or e-mail to make sure that there were no misunderstandings.
- To provide practice time to help your learner to gain confidence, schedule a time outside of tutoring when the learner calls you on the phone to chat.

Online resources:

Sample Roleplays:

http://esl.about.com/od/businessspeaking/a/t_role.htm

Listening activities for the telephone:

<http://www.esl-lab.com/eslbasic/telephone-cellphone-1.htm>

<http://www.esl-lab.com/phone/phonerd1.htm>