



# A Mr. Vig GUIDE

simple solutions for  
your biggest English headaches

“Huh?  
What did  
he say?”

**Understand English. Any  
accent. The FIRST time.**



# **“Huh? What did he say?”**

*Understand English. Any accent. The FIRST time.*

by Mr. Vig

Paris.

The autumn after I graduated from college.

I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. But I did know two things: I didn't want an office job and I wanted to live in a foreign country.

I had studied French in school. So why not go to Paris?

Unfortunately, back then I didn't know about teaching English; all I knew was there was an agency that for a small fee would find you a family who had kids and an extra room.

So I took some pictures of me playing with my niece. Sent them off to the agency. They found me a family. And off I went to Paris to be an au pair.

It was going to be a trip of many shocks and surprises and the first one came when I met my host mother at the airport.

What happened?

She spoke French.

Not like my French teacher in school, or the guy on the "Learn To Speak French In Your Car" tapes.

Real French.

Fast. Parisian accent. Slang. Incomplete sentences....

You know, how normal people talk.

That was the first time I saw how schools fail students.

Five years in a classroom and this was the result?

That was also when I first realized understanding is a skill.

Grammar rules and vocabulary is knowledge. But understanding is different. You have to practice it like you practice tennis or karate.

In this guide you'll learn how to practice this skill using techniques I've developed during my 2,000+ private lessons.

And don't worry, you won't even have to pack a suitcase to practice them.

Cheers,  
-Mr. Vig

# Six Reasons You Don't Understand Native Speakers

## REASON #1: YOU'RE TOO NERVOUS

One time in Prague I said “hello” to a girl who was walking down the street. She was very pretty and because she was very pretty, and because she was a stranger, I was very nervous.

As we were talking I remember asking her a question, I think it was, “Where are you from?”

But she didn't tell me. Instead, she said, “You already asked me that.”

Woops.

In that moment, it was super embarrassing. But now I think it's super interesting.

What happened?

My ears heard the sounds, but the information didn't stick in my brain.

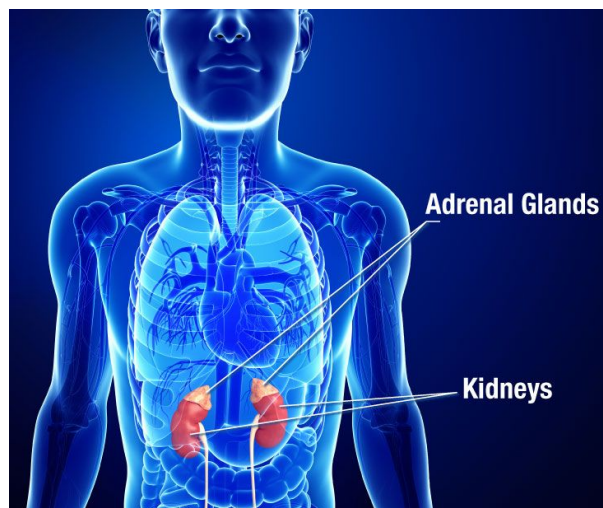
I later learned this is one thing that can happen when you're too nervous.

A little nervous can be good. It can focus you. But when you're too nervous, your brain doesn't quite work as well and everything is more difficult.

So why does this happen?

In the old days, your great-great-great (etc) grandfather would see a lion, his brain would tell his adrenal gland "Danger!" And his adrenal gland would send adrenaline into his body.

Here's what that looks like.



Your adrenal gland is an organ, like your kidneys are organs and your liver is an organ.

And it makes and releases a chemical called "adrenaline."

Adrenaline is great. It's exactly what you need when you want to run faster than a lion or have a boxing match with a bear.

But here's the problem....

First, in modern life, there are no lions and bears. But our brain still thinks talking to pretty girls and speaking English is the same as fighting a wild animal.

Second, adrenaline also tells your blood vessels to send more blood to the muscles it will need to fight the lion and less blood to your brain.

After all, why do you need to think while you're running for your life?

But for you, less blood means less oxygen, which means a slower brain, which means worse English.

And that's bad for you.

## **SOLUTION**

Meditate.

Meditation makes you a calmer, more focused, happier person.

This is not my opinion. There have been many scientific studies on this. You can, and should, read about this research online.

As it relates to getting nervous, someone who meditates is less likely to see a lion when he has to speak English.

I meditate daily and situations which bothered me or made me nervous before are now just mildly uncomfortable.

But I'm not going to teach you how to do it.

While the basics are simple, there are many different ways to do it.

I recommend starting by watching a video on Ted.com called "All it takes is 10 mindful minutes."



It's a good, simple introduction. Just do a search for “Andy Puddicombe Ted.”

But whatever method(s) you learn about, the most important thing is just to start, start now, and make it a daily habit.

# PROBLEM #2: YOU DON'T KNOW THE RIGHT WORDS

Here's an interesting fact:

Native speakers repeat the same few words in every conversation.

All native speakers.

And you do too in your native language.

Here are the numbers:

3,000 = 94%

2,000 = 92.7%

1,000 = 87.8%

That means, if you know just 3,000 words, you can understand almost 100% of the words in every conversation.

Amazing, right?

But it's not just an interesting fact, it's also a fantastic language strategy for beginners.

Want to learn a new language? Start with the 100 most commonly used words in that language, then the 1,000 most common, then the 2,000 most common.

Of course, the schools have never heard about this strategy. My Czech text book had the word for carpet, *koberec*, in the first chapter. This is the 2,800th most common word in Czech and should not have been in chapter one.

When I discovered this strategy I found a list, printed it, gave it to my students, and asked them if there were some words they didn't know.

And guess what I discovered...

Students who were intermediate, who had been learning English for years, some who were even advanced, still didn't know some of these most common words.

Some didn't know a lot.

So if you have problems understanding conversation, the reason might be that you don't know enough of the words which are in every conversation.

## **SOLUTION**

First, get [The Super Words Checklist](#). Print it out. And with a pen circle the words you don't know.

Next, learn them using the technique I teach in my other guide, [VocabFast](#).

Do not open a dictionary and think the words will magically stick in your brain.

# **PROBLEM #3**

## **YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE ACCENT**

My first week in Prague I had a problem understanding.

I'm not talking about understanding Czech.

I had a problem understanding English. Specifically, the teachers in my teacher training program from England.

I thought that was quite strange. While we were speaking the same language, the accent was foreign to me and sometimes I simply did not understand what they were saying.

The same thing happens when a student spends a lot of time with the same teacher. They get very good at understanding the teacher, but when they try to talk to someone else from a different part of the world, they don't understand and they don't know why.

## **SOLUTION**

This one is easy.

Practice listening to many accents.

In one experiment, students learning Chinese were divided into two groups. One group listened to a recording of a man with a Chinese accent. While the second group listened to recordings of several men with Chinese accents. Then, both groups had to listen to a recording of a man with a Chinese accent, whom they had never heard before. The second group, who had experience hearing many different people, was able to understand him better.

This is what happened with me in Prague. By the end of the month I was used to the London and Newcastle and Liverpool accents and had no problem understanding.

Start with the accents you'll need. If you do business with Australians but not Canadians, it makes sense to listen to Australians.

For the American accent I recommend [npr.org/podcasts](http://npr.org/podcasts). For the British accent I recommend [bbc.co.uk/podcasts](http://bbc.co.uk/podcasts).

Find something that looks interesting and try it out.

For other accents, Google is your friend.

For example, to learn the Australian accent you can search for "Australian radio" or "Australian podcasts."

And that's it.

Listen every day. Start today. Start right now. Make it enjoyable. And make it a habit.

# **PROBLEM #4**

## **YOU'RE TRANSLATING IN YOUR HEAD**

When you were in school how did you learn vocabulary?

Was it: English words on one side of the page and the translated word on the other?

In most schools, including mine when I was a kid trying to learn French, that was the standard method.

And if you did that for a few years – big surprise – you may have developed a translating habit.

And now, when you want to say a sentence in English, first you think of the sentence in your native language, then you translate it into English.

And it goes the other way, too. You hear an English sentence, and then you translate it into your language.

Not good.

Real conversation goes too fast to translate every word.

Plus, it's a lot of work.

I knew a professional interpreter in Prague and she told me that her work was so mentally exhausting she and the other interpreters only worked for 15 minutes before taking a break.

Here's another problem, you hear a word that's kind of familiar. And you start thinking, "Now what's the translation of that word...?" And

a few seconds later you remember, but meanwhile the conversation didn't wait for you and you missed some important information and now you're lost.

No fluent English speaker has the translation habit.

## **SOLUTION**

Get a subscription to one of the streaming video services like Netflix or Disney or Amazon Prime.

Pick a show that you've already seen in your native language or one that everyone's talking about.

Sit down in front of your TV or laptop.

And then start watching.

Don't use a dictionary.

Don't stop and rewind.

Just watch.

You won't understand everything.

That's not the point.

The point is that very soon you'll stop translating. You'll just give up. They talk too fast and it will be impossible to translate.

And after some time a wonderful thing will happen — you'll start to understand.

It won't happen the first evening, or maybe even the first week or first month. But if you stick with it, if watch every day for an hour or

more, after a few weeks or months you will understand and you'll understand without translating.

It's not a quick fix, but it's a good fix.

More people have learned English from watching TV than from sitting in a classroom.

# **PROBLEM #5**

## **YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND NATIVE SPEAKERS**

One time I was sitting on my couch in my apartment in Prague, drinking some delicious Czech beer with a friend.

I wanted to put my beer down on the coffee table but I didn't want it to leave a ring.

So I asked my friend, "Could you please pass the coaster?"

She looked at the table, she saw some candles, some books and some coasters. She thought about it, and then she replied, "I don't know what that is."

Obviously, "coaster" was a new word for her. But that wasn't the real problem. The bigger problem was that she was a perfectionist.

Her rule was, I must understand every word.

And that's a problem because you will never understand every word.

You will never have perfect understanding.

A non-perfectionist would have seen the books and thought, "That's not a coaster." A non-perfectionist would have seen the candles and thought, "That's not a coaster." And then the non-perfectionist would have made a guess that the other round thing you put under a beer bottle was this thing called "a coaster."

I don't mean to brag, but I am the opposite of a perfectionist. Almost every week a friend or a student will send me an email to tell me I misspelled a word in my weekly email.

Oh well.

And it's the same with understanding.

One time I was getting into an Uber in America in the city of Baltimore, which has a lot of immigrants and therefore a lot of accents.

I opened the door, sat down, the driver smiled and said some words.

I did not understand a single one of them.

But I understood what he wanted. I knew where I was. And I knew the script for this type of situation.

So I replied, "I'm good. How are you doing?"

And he was happy with that we were having a conversation.

## **SOLUTION**

First, understand where the perfectionist mindset was born.

It came from the same place all your bad English habits came from — school!

For years and years you took tests and you tried to be perfect. Maybe you did transcription exercises where you had to write every word you heard. Or maybe you spoke in front of your classmates and were punished or laughed at when you made a mistake.

Second, the next time you're speaking your native language, pay attention to how many words you don't understand.

And then pay attention to how many times you ask the person to repeat and how many times you continue because you understand enough to understand what he or she wants to say.

You probably do this all the time. You don't understand every word but you understand the meaning and that's enough.

You're not a perfectionist in your own language.

So don't be a perfectionist in English.

# **PROBLEM # 6: YOU'RE JUST A BAD LISTENER**

How do you know if you're a bad listener?

Do you daydream during conversation?

Do you have conversations in your head while the other person is talking?

Do you interrupt a lot?

Do you have difficulty focusing?

Are you busy thinking about what you're going to say next? Maybe even translating some words and getting them ready?

If yes, then you may be a bad listener.

And if you're a bad listener, it doesn't matter how many English words you know or how good your pronunciation is.

It's going to be a bad conversation if only one person is listening.

## **SOLUTION**

First, try putting away the goddamn phone.

I really hate those things.

One problem with them is that they give people with normal brains a case of ADD (attention deficit disorder). Meaning, people who used to be able to focus now have the same attention span as a goldfish.

I know when I spend a few hours surfing the web, immediately after it's more difficult to pay attention during a conversation.

Sitting still with a friend and doing nothing but listening feels boring. He talks slowly, his story is slow, and there's nothing new to click on.

A book I can recommend about this problem is *Digital Minimalism* by Cal Newport.

Meditation is another solution.

Meditation, and also mindfulness, are fantastic for improving focus and listening skills.

For the translation habit, I can recommend daily TV.

For all the other problems, good news! You don't need an English teacher, or even an English speaker, to start fixing them.

Because if you're a bad listener in English, you're probably a bad listener in your native language.

So the next conversation you have with a colleague, husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend, friend, or even the smelly guy on the metro with a cat on his head, start practicing being a good listener.

Practice focusing. Practice not interrupting.

Above all, practice being interested in the other person and what he or she is saying.

Simply being interested in the other person fixes more English problems than anything else, including listening.

# YOUR DAILY UNDERSTANDING ROUTINE

## Every Morning

Immediately after you wake up, go for a twenty-minute walk outside. Listen to English.

## Dead Time

This is time when you're waiting, driving, sitting on the bus, doing the dishes, walking the dog, etc. It's usually wasted time, but you're going to use it wisely and listen to English every chance you get.

It may not seem like much, but five minutes here and ten minutes there will add up and give you tremendous results.

## Every Evening

Watch one TV show before bed. (Netflix, Youtube, news, etc.)

# **BONUS**

## Create an English Environment

Imagine if you lived in London or New York or Sydney. Do you think your English would improve? Do you think it would be easy to improve? Maybe it would happen automatically?

It's because you'd be in an English environment. You'd wake up in the morning and hear English on the radio. You'd go outside and you'd read English everywhere you looked. You would be surrounded by it.

Here's a crazy idea. What if you did the same thing... without going to the airport!?

It won't be exactly the same as living abroad. But with a little creativity, and I'll show you how, you can get 80% of the benefit of living abroad.

How you do this is by listing everything in your environment that's in your native language and replacing it with something in English.

For example, if your default language for Google is your native language, switch it to English.

Doing just one or two small changes like this won't make a big difference in your English, but when you change everything, that's when you'll notice the positive effects of your new English Environment.

# IF UNDERSTANDING IS DIFFICULT

Remember, you want your listening to be easy. If you don't understand every word, that's ok. If you don't understand what's happening and you're confused, then it's too difficult.

Unfortunately, most of the free audio online is made for native speakers, and therefore it's fast and advanced.

Here are some tips for when you can't understand:

- Listen to shows or audio books for kids.
- Use subtitles. But only English subtitles. Then watch it again without subtitles.
- Slow it down. Lots of websites and podcasts now let you control the audio speed.
- Read it first, then listen to it. For example, you can read a book then listen to the audio book. Or you can find a website that provides text and audio. Here are two I recommend:
  - [ted.com](http://ted.com) (advanced)
  - [6 Minute English](http://6minuteenglish.com) (easy)

# THE BEST FREE AUDIO ONLINE

The best audio to listen to is whatever you LOVE.

Not like. Not kinda like.

But LOVE.

It's important that you love what you're listening to for two reasons:

1. You'll pay attention more. If you're bored you won't focus. If you don't focus, you won't learn.
2. You'll listen more. If it's boring, you won't want to listen and you'll listen as little as possible. If it's fascinating you'll want to listen more and you will listen more.

Unfortunately, I don't know what you're interested in and what you love. Maybe that's sports or politics or stories about celebrities.

Only you can find what you love.

Just remember, make sure it's easy.

Easy + Fascinating + every day = no more understanding problems.

Here are some suggestions:

For audio books: [audible.com](http://audible.com)

For podcasts: Do a search for "best podcasts about \_\_\_\_" and then enter your hobby or passion and the accent you want to understand.

Ex. "Best British business podcasts."

You can also find many interesting podcasts on these two sites:

- [bbc.com/podcasts](http://bbc.com/podcasts)
- [npr.org/podcasts](http://npr.org/podcasts)

Easy English:

- [BBC 6 Minute English](#)
- [AJ Hoge podcast](#)

# **THE BLACK LIST - WHAT TO NEVER LISTEN TO ONLINE**

This is the short list of internet sites you should NOT go to, visit, see, watch, listen to, or download.

In fact, I want you to stop thinking about them right now!

These include:

## 1. Talking Dictionaries

A teacher who talks about a word only makes things worse. I've never learned a word because someone talked about it. I only know words because I've seen or heard them again and again in context.

## 2. Over-Teachers

If a teacher explains grammar and makes things complicated and uses big words like "the subjunctive" then you know he or she is over teaching.

When you analyze anything – sports, music, walking down the street – it becomes more difficult and you're more likely to make a mistake. Instead, do what the professionals do – watch, absorb, and imitate.

### 3. Anything with “business English” in the title

Again, super boring and probably not what you need for your business.

Unfortunately, this short list includes 99% of BBC Learn English material, 99% of YouTube teachers, and probably 100% of what language schools have to offer.

The good news is that what’s left – Netflix, podcasts, Harry Potter – is about a million times more interesting and will be a million billion times more beneficial for your English.

It’s like eating ice cream and losing weight.

Enjoy!

-Mr. Vig

# About Mr. Vig

**Awards Won:** none

**New York Times Bestsellers:** nope

**Lives Saved:** zero

But I do have a blog.

And it's not one of those boring blogs, either.

It's about English. (No, really. I promise. It's not boring!)

Check it out. And when you join I'll send you some free stuff.

Here's the link: [MrVig.com](http://MrVig.com)

Cheers,

-Ryan Viguerie

(also known as Mr. Vig)

