



A Mr. Vig GUIDE

simple solutions for
your biggest English headaches

“I’m Afraid
to **SPEAK**
ENGLISH!”



The simple method to enjoy
every English conversation
EVEN IF your English is so
bad it causes earthquakes
and makes rugby players cry

Some Strange Students

IT WAS JANUARY, 2005. I was a very new teacher. And the language agency I worked for gave me a new assignment.

Twice a week I had to go to the train station, travel a few kilometers outside of Prague, and teach a few group classes at a company called Lonza.

I liked getting paid to sit on a train and stare out the window at the Czech countryside, but there was something a little strange about this company. The students were... let's say, not very chatty.

Sure, they were scientists. And yes, most of them lived in nearby villages and had little contact with foreigners.

But it went a little deeper than just being shy.

Here's an example.

My first day there, as usual, I asked my students about their past experience with English. I wanted to know how many years they had been at it, what they wanted to work on, and I wanted to know what they had done with the previous teacher, a guy named Gregor from Scotland whom I had just met in the teachers' room at the language agency.

They told me everything I wanted to know, but strangely, none of them could remember the teacher's name.

They had spent an entire year with him, sitting for one or two hours a week in his classes, which were mostly conversation, and they couldn't remember his unusual name, or any details about his interesting life, (he was travelling the world with his girlfriend teaching English).

It was the same in every class I had that first day.

At the time, I didn't know what to think of it.

Now I do: it was a symptom.

Like a cough is a symptom which tells you you have a bigger problem, maybe a cold or the flu, not knowing about the person you're talking to shows that you're not good at having a conversation.

They, like most students, thought their problem was the language.

They believed, If I learn more words and memorize more rules, I will be better at conversation. I won't be so nervous. And I won't make so many mistakes.

But over the next few years as I helped students' English improve, I saw that wasn't always true: while some learned more grammar, that didn't always mean their conversation or their confidence improved.

What do I mean by conversation? For me, it's the ability to meet a new person, to make a good impression, and to start a relationship (business, sales, friendship, whatever).

And that's really what most of my students wanted.

That's also something you'll never learn in a grammar book or from a grammar teacher.

But that is something you're going to learn now.

What you're going to learn in this short book is the lesson I should have taught at Lonza. More than conditionals and pronunciation, what they needed was this simple method. If I had known then what I know now, I'm sure by the time I got on the train for the last time they would have been conversation masters. That's my wish for you.

And the good news is, it's a lot easier than you think. And you don't have to learn even one grammar rule!

Another Bad Idea From School

FOR EXACTLY ONE YEAR, I taught English at a high school in Prague.

Never again.

It was more yelling than teaching and my throat didn't like it.

Anyway, in order to graduate, the seniors had to take a series of oral tests called the *maturita*.

A month or so before the end of the year, the memorizing would begin. As many useless facts as they could stuff into their brains the better.

Then on the day of the exam the girls would put on nice dresses and the boys got into what looked like their dead grandfathers' old suit. And typically it was the dead grandfather who was five inches taller and fifty pounds heavier.

They would wait out in the hall with their classmates, memorizing more useless facts, until finally their name was called.

The student would then go into the classroom, take a seat in front of two teachers, reach into a pouch, pull out a piece of paper, and speak on that topic for several minutes.

When I was one of those teachers, I sat there silently. The student had my complete attention. I listened for mistakes. Then I would judge the student by giving him or her a grade which determined if they were successful or not.

This, of course, is not the real world.

Nor is this a conversation.

But unfortunately, it seems to be the model a lot of my students have followed.

So many times when I sit down with a student, or even start a conversation with a stranger, I get the feeling that they've become the teenager again in the examination room.

They're nervous. They just answer questions. And they try hard not to make a mistake by speaking slowly and carefully.

This is the wrong way to have a conversation.

Here's a better idea.

Move the Spotlight

IMAGINE AN ACTOR ON STAGE. The theater is dark except for one circle of light. This is the spotlight and the actor stands in the middle of it.

I don't know about you, but I'd rather be in the audience.

The actor has a job to do. It's a performance. It's work. All eyes are on him. And it sounds incredibly stressful.

And what about your conversations? Are they stressful? Do they feel like work? Could it be because you're in the spotlight?

So here's an idea — move the spotlight. Move it to the other person and keep it there. Talk about his stupid boss at the bank, his football team which just won, his ugly tie, his sick dog, or his genius kid who just learned to walk.

Move the spotlight to the other person and:

- He'll do most of the talking.
- He'll enjoy doing most of the talking.
- He'll think you're fabulous for letting him do most of the talking.
- And you can relax.

Why Moving the Spotlight Works

DO YOU KNOW what the most common subject in the English language is? According to research on the most frequently used words in English, the word “I” is #11.

But the other words aren't words you can talk about. They're mostly verbs (to be) and prepositions (to, at, etc.). “I” is the first word that can be the subject of a sentence. Therefore, it's the most popular subject in English conversation.

People love talking about themselves.

Next time you're in public, listen to other people's' conversations and notice how much you hear the word “I” and how many people are talking about themselves.

Notice how people naturally take the spotlight. They wait for the other person to stop talking and then they grab the light and put it back on themselves.

“Me, me, me, me, me...”

That's just how a normal conversation goes.

In the classic book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which I highly recommend, the author tells the story of sitting next to a stranger during a dinner party. He didn't have anything in common with her, but by the end of the evening she told him that he was the best conversationalist she had ever met.

And the interesting part - he had barely spoken! All he did to make her think he was brilliant was put the spotlight on her and keep it there.

In a biography I read about President Reagan, the author wrote that although Reagan was famous and powerful, people felt comfortable when they spoke to him. He explained that it was because Reagan's attitude was different. Whereas most famous or important people walk into a room with the attitude “Here I am”, Reagan's attitude communicated, “Ah, there you are.”

In other words, he moved the spotlight onto the other person.

How to Move the Spotlight in One Step

ASK QUESTIONS.

That's it.

One step.

Simple.

Ask questions about the other person and they will do all the conversation work for you and think you're amazing.

But ask the wrong questions, or in the wrong way, and your conversation partner will fall into a deep sleep and men in white suits will need to be called to give him electric shocks to keep his heart beating.

Here's how to make sure your questions don't do that.

How to Ask Good Questions

1. *Make Them Real*

In other words, don't be fake.

Plastic Christmas trees are fake.

A politician kissing babies is fake.

Michael Jackson's nose is fake.

No one likes fake.

So if you're talking to an astronaut and you think space is boring, don't ask about rockets.

The challenge is to quickly find something about the person that you're interested in. What I've discovered is that usually - not always, but most of the time — if I keep asking questions I'll find something about the person I genuinely want to talk about.

Here's an example.

In Prague I used to belong to a networking website called "Internations." Every month they hosted events. It's a great way to meet people from all over the world, practice your languages, and maybe make some business contacts.

I just went to meet girls.

Anyway, one time I found myself trapped in a corner. No girls anywhere. And blocking my escape was a man with a brown tie and a glass of water.

"Uh, this conversation is going to be painful," I thought.

But I started asking questions.

"Where are you from?"

"How long have you been in Prague?"

"Is this your first event?"

So far, nothing he said was interesting to me. If I had asked him to tell me more about his hometown in Ohio my questions would have been fake because I didn't care about his hometown.

So I kept going.

"What do you do?"

"I own a shop."

Ah ha! He's a businessman! Something I'm interested in.

I asked him about his customers, why they buy, how much rent costs, how he plans to expand...

I was genuinely interested and the conversation was saved!

2. Make them Open-ended

A close-ended question is a question you can answer with either “yes” or “no.” Close-ended questions don’t start brilliant conversations.

“Do you like this weather?”

“Yes.”

Not a good conversation.

But an open-ended question...

“What’s your favorite thing to do Sunday morning?”

It makes the person think, it makes them talk more, and hopefully it starts a conversation.

Ok, so questions are important. But they’re not everything...

What’s 100x More Important Than Your Words?

THINK OF A RECENT conversation you had with a friend.

Maybe you met for coffee... maybe you had a phone chat... maybe you ran into him at the store...

Can you remember the exact words he said?

Probably not.

And in a month or two, you’ll forget the conversation ever happened.

But now try to remember this: How did your friend make you feel?

If you're like most people, you can't remember people's words, but you can easily remember how they make you feel.

FACT ONE: *We forget what people say; we remember how they make us feel.*

How is this possible?

Sometimes it's their words.

If you tell your wife, "Honey, did your butt get bigger?" she's probably not going to have a great day.

But more often it's the person's emotions behind his words that are affecting you.

For example, if someone is in a great mood when they're talking to you, suddenly you feel good.

Or, if someone is depressed or has low energy, soon you start to feel like his dark cloud is over your head.

FACT TWO: *Emotions are contagious.*

Like a cold is contagious, or a virus is contagious, we can also catch someone's emotions.

When I started my first office job, I wanted to understand the business and what everyone in the company does so one day I sat with one of the phone sales guys and watched him work. I noticed on his desk he had a small mirror. And at the bottom of the mirror it said: "How you look is what they hear."

Brilliant!

If you look like you're tired, bored, depressed or angry, it's impossible to sound cheerful, happy, enthusiastic or interested.

THEREFORE: Because your emotions are more important than your words, the most important thing you can do before a conversation is feel good.

How to Feel Good in 120 Seconds

IF YOU'RE ALREADY HAVING A GREAT DAY, PERFECT.

But what if you're not? Or what if it's the end of the day and you're feeling tired? Or what if it's just a normal day and you'd like to feel better?

It is possible to change your mood. And you can do it so quickly and easily it'll probably surprise you.

Let's start with something you already know: when you're in a bad mood or a depressed mood or a sad mood other people can see it. They see that your head is down and your movements are slow and your posture is bad. So it worked like this: first something happened, your mood changed, and then your body changed (The big word for this in English is "physiology.")

But it also works the other way.

If you change your physiology you will change your mood. Your emotions and your body are connected. You won't have a choice. Change your posture and your brain will release different chemicals and your mood will change.

Here's an experiment:

1. Measure your confidence from one to ten. Just think about it for a second and pick a number.
2. Stand up and stand like Wonder Woman. (hands on your hips, head high, chest out, take up space)
3. Stand like this for two minutes.
4. Measure your confidence again.

Every time I've done this experiment with students they tell me they feel more confident.

Go ahead and try it.



Stand like Wonder Woman if you want to feel like Super Man.

And if you're having the worst day of your life and nothing will get that cloud away from your head, then stay home. We've all met people we wish had taken that advice.

How to Say Good Things Without Saying a Word

I USED TO HAVE AN OFFICE IN PRAGUE. But after a few months I went back to teaching in my apartment. I thought sitting at a big, wooden table in an old Prague 1 building would be more professional than sitting on my blue couch.

But really, the only difference was that my students weren't as relaxed. And that was definitely the case with the student I'm about to tell you about.

When I walked in that morning he was already sitting at the table waiting for me.

I introduced myself. We shook hands. I offered him some coffee. Then I went to the kitchen to make it.

That was maybe ten seconds total. A dozen words were spoken. But I already had a strong feeling about this young man. And it wasn't positive.

I knew what his real problem was right away.

But of course, when I came back into the room and interviewed him, he told me his problem was his grammar.

You see, he wanted more foreign customers. But after he met with a potential client, they would choose his competition.

Well, his English wasn't perfect, but it wasn't bad. In fact, I had a hard time finding his mistakes.

So, in my opinion, the reason he was losing business was not because of what he was saying with his words, but what he was saying with his body.

Here's what I saw: his arms were crossed and there was a big frown on his face.

He looked pissed off!

And who wants to do business with someone who looks like he's about to smash a window?

Body language is SO important. Little things that we're not usually aware of communicate so loudly they can yell. Sometimes we can't even hear what the person is saying because their body language is so loud.

Change your body language and you can, without using any conditionals or confusing phrasal verbs, tell the other person a message everyone loves to hear, which is:

"You're important and I'm listening to you."

Who doesn't want to hear that?

Bad Body Language	Good Body Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Crossed arms ✓ Looking at your watch ✓ Looking at your phone ✓ Looking around the room ✓ A frown on your face ✓ A stone face (you don't move the muscles in your face) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Eye contact ✓ Leaning in ✓ Nodding when the person talks ✓ Expressive face (you move the muscles in your face) ✓ Smiling (But not fake; it can be a small smile.)

You can also throw in the occasional “Uh huh,” “Hmmm,” or “Oh really...” to communicate that you’re listening.

Advanced Techniques

ONCE YOU’RE COMFORTABLE WITH QUESTIONS AND BODY LANGUAGE, here are some bonus techniques you can try.

1. ***Give the person a conversation ball***

In one of my favorite books, *The Catcher in the Rye*, the main character is talking about trying to meet girls in New York City. He’s having a difficult time because the girls aren’t very interesting. He then gives an analogy of a good conversation. He says it’s like throwing a ball with another person. You throw the ball. The other person catches it. He throws it back. You catch it. You throw it. And so on. Back and forth.

So if a conversation is like throwing a ball, I’ve noticed there are some things I can say which the other person can catch more easily and other things I say which the other person can’t.

For example, when I moved to Maryland and I told someone I’m from Virginia, the reaction I got was often, “Oh.”

Virginia's about two feet away from Maryland and everyone in Maryland has been there and who cares?

But if I said, "I just moved here from Prague," the reaction was usually, "Wow!"

Either the person had visited Prague, wanted to visit, had family from there, or watch a TV show about it.

They tell me their connection. And the conversation is on!

And now I can ask questions about a subject we're both interested in.

So what's something about you that people like to talk about?

I don't know your life, but experiment, notice what information people react to, and then when you find something about yourself that people like to talk about, don't keep it hidden, start the conversation with it.

For example...

"Hi, I'm an accountant but my hobby is making sushi from the rats I catch behind my house."

Or...

"Hi, my name is Bob. My mother wanted me to be a girl so she made me wear dresses until I was five."

Or, my favorite...

"Hi, I'm not wearing any underwear. Where do you live?"

(Tip: for maximum effect, try not to blink when you say this one.)

2. ***Throw a Conversation Bomb.***

One of my favorite podcasts is about marketing and in the host's opinion, the number one sin a marketer can make when communicating is being boring.

In one episode, he told a story of being at a restaurant and watching a couple on a first date. The guy was being very safe in his conversation and the woman was obviously very bored.

The marketing guy then said what the guy on the date should have done at that moment, which was say something like, “You know, it’s hard to think of anyone who’s done more for the female gender than Donald J. Trump.”

That’s a Conversation Bomb!

You don’t have to be rude or offensive. The idea is to say something that the person has an opinion about and will want to debate.

When the conversation is about the weather (my FAVORITE subject!) I like to say things like “I love rainy days, don’t you?” or “Isn’t sunshine the worst?” or “You know, I wish it would snow in the summer, too.”

You can also say things that you know are incorrect.

If a woman is nicely dressed with perfect hair and nails, I might ask her, “So, how many pigs do you have on your farm?”

Or if the person is Asian, “So what part of Nigeria are you from?”

When the conversation gets stuck in the Boring Zone, or you just feel like having some fun, throw in a Conversation Bomb, sit back, and enjoy.

Three Ways to Escape a Conversation

NOT ALL CONVERSATIONS WILL BE AMAZING. Not all conversation partners will become your new best friend. And sometimes, well, you will want to politely exit the conversation and find a better one.

Here are three techniques I use at social events.

1. *“I’m going to get another drink. Do you want to join me?”*

If I’m at an event — a party, a conference, etc. — I try to enter a new conversation with an almost-empty drink. That way, I know that whenever I want I can quickly finish the drink and excuse myself to get another.

I also like to invite the person I’m talking with to join me because I know how awkward it is to suddenly be standing alone in the middle of a room. And what usually happens is that at the bar or on the way to the bar another conversation starts or he finds someone else he wants to talk to and conveniently disappears.

2. *“Excuse me, do you know where the bathrooms are?”*

This one is good if you don’t want the person to join you. And if he does join you, well, I guess your new conversation skills worked too well.

3. *“Who have you met tonight?” Then: “Come on, let’s go mingle.”*

In English, “mingle” means to move around a room meeting people and starting conversations.

When you ask someone who they’ve met, usually the number is small. This is a way of stating the obvious: We came here to meet people but we’re not so let’s start.

That makes total sense and most people will be thankful you’re taking the lead.

Then walk up to anyone you want and stand there with a smile until they stop talking and look at you. (Don’t worry, you’re not interrupting or being rude because there’s a 98% chance they were bored.) Introduce yourself and your new friend and start asking questions. In this situation I usually start with, "So what are we talking about?"

The Exciting Conclusion

AS WE SAY IN ENGLISH, LET'S LAND THIS PLANE.

Remember my students at Lonza?

They said their problem was speaking.

But they also said they didn't remember the name of their last teacher.

And THAT was their REAL problem — they weren't interested in other people.

You see, when you're interested in another person, you want to know more about him. And to know more about him you have to ask questions. Then the person starts to like you because you're interested in him. Then he becomes interested in you and asks you questions. Then you have a friend. And friends have lots of conversations. And when you have lots of conversations in English, your English naturally improves.

See how that works?

About Mr. Vig

Awards Won: zero

New York Times Bestsellers: nope

Lives Saved: none

But I have been on TV. Although I was in a crowd and you can't really tell it's me.

And 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



from the home page of MrVig.com

Cheers,
-Ryan Viguerie
(also known as Mr. Vig)

To Learn More

How To Win Friends And Influence People

A classic. Read it and reread it and practice the lessons the author teaches and your life will change.

[This video](#) explains how your physiology changes your mood.

[This article](#) gives you another simple way to quickly change your mood.

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