

# The art of spoken English

*At the March 26 general meeting, guest speaker Judy Thompson illustrated the many foibles of the English language in her energetic and passionate presentation.* **by Trudi Down**



*Judy Thompson,  
ESL instructor*

**W**HO KNEW A DISCUSSION ABOUT THE SPOKEN English language would be such a lively topic? Starting with the energetic and passionate presentation by guest speaker Judy Thompson and continuing through the Q & A period, the evening provided a whirlwind tour of many principles of English and many of its foibles. Thompson's thesis offered a deeper appreciation of how highly absurd spoken English must seem to foreigners.

Thompson, a Sheridan College ESL instructor, claims that spoken and written English are in fact two different languages. In her presentation she demonstrated how German, Norse, and French influence English and that is why there are many inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation in English.

Over the years, a number of methods have been developed to help explain these inconsistencies and to assist students trying to master English. Examples of such methods include

the International Phonetic Alphabet and the keyboard phonetic alphabet. Thompson used these and other inventions in her ESL classes, but her students typically found them confusing and not much help.

While attending school in Brazil for a year as part of a Rotary International student exchange, her daughter learned to speak Portuguese fluently. This provided Thompson with her language epiphany.

"We hear words and speak them first, long before we start reading or writing," she said. Just think of how we teach our children. We emphasize speaking first: say Mommy, say ball. "Why, then, do ESL classes spend so much time on reading and writing?" she wondered. Many of her students arrive in Canada with years of grammar lessons to their credit, yet they can't speak the language well and many cannot even pronounce



commonly used words. These New Canadians simply want to be able to converse in a natural manner in all types of ordinary daily situations, she said.

While teaching English in Korea, Thompson developed a colour code system for teaching the alphabet. In effect, she has devised a different phonetic alphabet for the spoken language. The vowel chart, for example, has 17 vowel sounds each represented by a different colour. Her young students quickly picked up the subtle differences in pronunciation for the “a” in black and the “ä” sound in grey. In addition to providing the colour words, the chart gives four word examples for each sound, including two labelled “odd spelling.” Hence, the “ahh” sound is represented by the colour black, and has **MAD**, **FAT**, **LAUGH**, and **HALF** as examples.

To further support her thesis that spoken English differs from written English, Thompson offered the following:

- English is not constructed in letter-and-sound units. Pronounce the words **TEN**, **TENT**, and **NATION**. Note how the “t” is pronounced in each.
- English is made up of word phrases that go together for no particular reason; “Collocations hold English together, not grammar!” Thompson claimed. Note: blue moon.
- English is idiomatic. We say “Merry Christmas,” even though there are other synonyms that mean the same: **JOYOUS**, **HAPPY**, **GAY**, **ECSTATIC**.

➤ English is a stress-based language. (Mandarin, on the other hand, is a sound-based language.) Say: **I WOULD LIKE A CUP OF WATER**. Note the stresses. The listener hears **CUP** and **WATER**, and knows exactly what you said. To a listener, the additional words are not necessary to the understanding of the sentence.

➤ Spoken English is learned as much through body language and tone of voice as it is through vocabulary. The way we say **PARTY** and **FUNERAL** goes a long way to understanding what these words mean.

Thompson spoke about the frustration felt by instructors and ESL students trying to grasp the essentials of English through traditional classes on the alphabet, spelling, and grammar. She noted that many mistakes foreigners make in pronunciation are the result of cultural differences. For example, in Cantonese, the last consonant of a word is usually not stressed. Thus, a Cantonese learner would say “si” for “six.” Once told that the last consonant is stressed in English, the person would pronounce “six” correctly.

Thompson’s presentation, which was also available to members by Webcast, offered insights into how English is constructed, as well as amusing anecdotes on the many oddities that populate the sentences we speak. 🌀

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