



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

GLOSSARY

it's Greek to me – a phrase used to show that one doesn't understand anything that one is hearing or reading, usually because it is too difficult or technical

* I tried to understand this chapter in the science textbook, but it's Greek to me!

fluent – with the ability to speak a language very well, almost like a native speaker

* Sean is studying Arabic, but it will be many years before he's fluent.

to make out – to be able to understand or see something that is very difficult to understand or see

* We can't make out what the doctor wrote on this form. Can you read her handwriting?

to get by – to be able to survive or cope, but not very well

* Would you be able to get by on just \$10 per day?

to have a good command of – to understand something very well; to be an expert in something; to have a lot of knowledge about something

* Professor Conkling wants all of his students to have a good command of music theory.

comprehension – an understanding of what one has read or heard

* Duncan is trying to improve his English comprehension skills by listening to the news on the radio every morning.

stock phrase – a group of words that one has memorized for speaking in another language, especially if one doesn't have the language skills to create that phrase on one's own

* Before traveling, we tried to learn some important stock phrases, like "Where's the bathroom?" and "How much does this cost?"

haltingly – slowly and with hesitation or periods of silence between words

* Sheila speaks haltingly, focusing on the pronunciation of each sound.

to freeze up – to be unable to do or say anything, usually because one is nervous or frightened

* As soon as she walked onto stage, she froze up and couldn't remember what she had planned to say.



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

phrase book – a small book with many phrases in a foreign language, used as a tool to communicate with people who speak that language

* Let's buy a Farsi phrase book and learn how to say some basic things before our trip.

to get through to (someone) – to help someone understand oneself; to be able to communicate one's ideas to someone

* The Wangs are worried that they don't know how to get through to their teenage son.

articulate – able to speak clearly and be understood; able to communicate one's ideas in a way that other people can understand

* Wisteria is much more articulate when she writes than when she speaks.

to cobble together – to use many different pieces of information to create something useful, especially when one doesn't have a clear plan for doing so

* The professor couldn't find a textbook she liked, so she cobbled together the course from many different books, articles, and websites.

to get (one's) point across – to be able to communicate one's idea so that it is understood by someone else

* He didn't give a great presentation, but it was good enough to get his point across to the audience.

to follow (one's) lead – to do what another person is doing; to copy another person's behavior

* Why can't you follow your sister's lead and sit quietly while the adults talk?

to bring (something) up – to introduce a new topic of conversation; to talk about a specific thing

* Don't let me forget to bring up the new sales figures in tomorrow's meeting. I forgot to talk about them last time.

to misinterpret – to misunderstand; to believe that someone's words or actions have a different meaning than what he or she had originally intended

* She has always been nice to him, but he misinterpreted her friendship as romantic interest.

to run (someone) out of town – to make someone leave a city, usually because he or she has done something wrong or because everyone dislikes him or her

* In the past, a woman could have been run out of town for getting pregnant before she was married.



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Why doesn't Blaire want to say something to the speaker?
 - a) Because she's nervous.
 - b) Because she doesn't know Greek.
 - c) Because she doesn't speak the language well enough.
2. Who would be the best communicator?
 - a) Someone who speaks haltingly.
 - b) Someone who is articulate.
 - c) Someone who can cobble sentences together.

WHAT ELSE DOES IT MEAN?

to get by

The phrase "to get by," in this podcast, means to be able to survive or cope, but not very well: "Chad didn't understand math very well, but he studied hard and was able to get by in the course." The phrase "to get over (something)" means to stop spending time thinking about something bad that happened in the past and begin to live one's normal life again: "You and Betty broke up more than three months ago. It's time to get over it and start dating other women!" The phrase "to get through (something)" means to endure, or to continue through a difficult situation: "I know this has been a difficult month, but we'll get through it together." Finally, the phrase "to get along" means to have a friendly relationship and enjoy spending time with each other: "It's nice to see our kids getting along so well."

to bring (something) up

In this podcast, the phrase "to bring (something) up" means to introduce a new topic of conversation or to talk about a specific thing: "Please don't bring up his divorce. He doesn't like talking about it." The phrase "to bring (someone) down" means to make someone feel sad or depressed: "Whenever I spend time with Carmen, she always brings me down because she spends so much time talking about wars and poverty." The phrase "to bring (someone) along" means to take another person to a particular event: "I'd love to go to the movies with you, but can I bring my little sister along?" Finally, the phrase "to bring out" means to give emphasis to something, or to help some characteristic be seen: "The color of your dress really brings out the green in your eyes."



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

CULTURE NOTE

Many American high schools offer classes in “speech” (the ability to make oral (spoken) presentations) and “debate” (the ability to argue one’s opinion). At many schools, all students have to take a speech class, but a debate class is usually an “elective” (a course that is not required for graduation, but can be chosen by students).

In a speech class, usually students are “assigned” (told to work on) topics and given time to prepare their presentation, often using “visual aids” (things for audience members to look at while one presents information). Some of the speeches are “impromptu,” meaning that the students might have only 1-2 minutes to prepare their speech. Students learn how to organize their ideas and “overcome” (be able to work past) their fear of “public speaking” (making presentations in front of groups of people).

In a debate class, students learn how to present and “defend” (protect from attack) opinions on “controversial” (with many different, strong opinions) issues. Sometimes they have to “argue” (present information for or against something) opinions that are not their personal opinions. They have to learn to “support their argument” (show the reason for believing something) with “facts” (things that can be proven as true) and be “persuasive” (able to change other people’s opinions).

Many schools have competitions for debate teams, with the winner often “going on” (moving up to the next level) to compete at the city, state, or national level. Many parents “encourage” (try to help) their children to participate in debate teams, because they think it helps them “develop” (improve and grow) their “self-confidence” (belief that one can do something) and is good preparation for a future “career” (job).

Comprehension Questions Correct Answers: 1 – c; 2 – b



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 521: Describing Speech and Language Ability.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 521. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Visit our website at eslpod.com. Consider supporting this podcast by becoming an ESL Podcast member. When you do that, you get an 8- to 10-page Learning Guide for every episode we currently produce. Or, you can make a donation by going to our website as well.

This episode is called "Describing Speech and Language Ability." It's a dialogue between Blaire and Antonio. They are talking to someone who speaks a different language and they are having difficulty communicating with that person, something I'm sure we all have an experience with. We're going to look at some vocabulary that we use to describe someone's language ability and the way they speak. Let's get started.

[start of dialogue]

Blaire: Do you have any idea what he's saying?

Antonio: It's Greek to me. You're supposed to be the one who's fluent. Can't you make out what he's saying?

Blaire: I never said I was fluent. I said I could get by in the language. There's a big difference.

Antonio: Why don't you try saying something to him?

Blaire: What should I say?

Antonio: How about, "I don't have a good command of the language. Could you please speak more slowly?"

Blaire: I don't think speaking more slowly will help my comprehension. Besides, I only know a few stock phrases, and even those I can only say haltingly, if I don't freeze up altogether.



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

Antonio: Give me the phrase book. I'll see if I can get through to him.

Blaire: What are you going to say?

Antonio: I don't know, but we're two fairly articulate people. We should be able to cobble together a few sentences to get our point across, don't you think?

Blaire: Okay, I'll follow your lead, but, um, just don't say anything insulting...like last time.

Antonio: Are you bringing that up again?! It's not my fault that the entire town misinterpreted what I said! I was trying to compliment the women, not insult them.

Blaire: Tell that to the men who ran you out of town!

[end of dialogue]

Our dialogue between Blaire and Antonio begins with Blaire asking, "Do you have any idea what he's saying?" Do you know what this person is saying? She doesn't understand him. Antonio says, "It's Greek to me." This is an old expression that means I don't understand anything that I'm hearing or anything that I'm reading, usually because it's too difficult or it's too technical. "It's Greek to me," Greek being the language of Greece, of course. The idea is that that would be very difficult for someone to understand. I'm not sure the exact origin of that expression, but that is the expression we use when something is very difficult to understand, and you don't understand any of it.

Antonio says, "You're supposed to be the one who's fluent." "To be fluent" means that you can listen to, understand, and speak a language very well. So, Antonio is saying to Blaire well, you said you were fluent – you are supposed be fluent in this language; we don't know what language it is. Antonio says, "Can't you make out what he's saying?" The verb "to make out" is a two-word phrasal verb meaning to be able to understand or see something that is difficult to understand or see. So in this case, the language is difficult; to make out what he's saying would be to understand, even though it is difficult. "To make out" also has an informal meaning – very different. It would mean, usually, for a romantic couple to express their physical affection – their physical liking of each other some way, by kissing for example. It's a word that you would probably hear high school students use more than anything. Although since I didn't have a girlfriend in high school, I never used the word myself that much.



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

Anyway, back to our dialogue, not my personal history! Antonio says, “Can’t you make out what he’s saying,” and Blaire says, “I never said I was fluent. I said I could get by in the language.” “To get by” means that you are able to survive; you are able to do something, but not very well. In this case, to get by in a language means you could survive in a country that spoke that language, but you would not do very well in speaking it. “Get” is one of those verbs that has dozens of meanings, for a few of them, take a look at our Learning Guide for some explanations.

Blaire says there’s a big difference between getting by and being fluent. Antonio says, “Why don’t you try saying something to him?” Blaire asks, “What should I say?” Antonio says, “How about, ‘I don’t have a good command of the language.’” “To have a good command of (something)” means to understand something very well, to be an expert in something, to have a lot of knowledge about something. It could be anything, not just languages; you could have a good command of computer programming, you could have a good command of podcasting. Here, it’s being used to refer to how good you are – how fluent you are in a language.

Antonio says that Blaire should say to the man, “I don’t have a good command of the language. Could you please speak more slowly?” Blaire says, “I don’t think speaking more slowly will help my comprehension.” Actually, it probably will, but... “Comprehension” means an understanding of what you are reading or what you are hearing. Blaire says, “Besides (in addition), I only know a few stock phrases.” A “stock (stock) phrase” is a group of words that you have memorized when you are speaking another language, especially if you can’t think of something on your own. Stock phrases would be things like: “Hello.” “How are you?” “Nice to meet you.” “Can you tell me where the bathroom is?” That last one is very important in every language!

Blaire says that she only knows a few stock phrases, “and even those I can only say haltingly.” “To speak haltingly” (haltingly) means very slowly and with hesitation, or periods of silence between the words. This is very common if you are a beginner in a language, you will speak haltingly. You’ll say something and then you’ll stop and you’ll think and you’ll say something else; that’s to speak haltingly. Blaire says she only speaks haltingly “if I don’t freeze up altogether.” “To freeze up” is a two-word phrasal verb meaning to be unable to do or say anything, usually because you’re very nervous or frightened: “I saw a beautiful woman and I went up to her to ask her name. And then, when I opened my mouth, I froze up.” “Froze” being the past tense of “freeze.” I wasn’t able to do anything, I was too nervous; I froze up. That’s why I didn’t have any girlfriends in high school!



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

Blaire is saying that she is too nervous and she doesn't know very much of the language to speak. So, Antonio says, "Give me the phrase book. A "phrase book" is a small book that has different expressions in a foreign language. People often have them when they travel to a country where they don't speak the language, so it helps them find the words they need to say what they mean. Phrase books are almost always bilingual by definition, so you have the phrase in your language and then in the language you're trying to speak. Antonio says, "Give me the phrase book. I'll see if I can get through to him." "To get through to (someone)" means to help someone understand what you are saying, to communicate your ideas to someone.

Antonio is going to try to use the phrase book to get through to this man. Blaire says, "What are you going to say?" Antonio says, "I don't know, but we're two fairly articulate people." "Articulate" means to be able to speak clearly and to be understood, to communicate your ideas in a way that other people can understand. Antonio says, "We should be able to cobble together a few sentences to get our point across, don't you think?" "To cobble (cobble) together" is a two-word verb meaning to use different pieces of information to create something useful, especially if you don't have a clear plan about what you're doing. If you have a situation that you didn't expect, you may need to cobble together a solution; take a little information from here, take some help from over here, and put them together so that you can survive – you can get through the situation.

Antonio is saying that he and Blaire should be able to cobble together a few sentences – put together a few sentences – to get their point across. "To get your point across" means to be able to communicate your ideas so that someone else understands them. It's similar to the expression "to get through to," although "to get through to" can often mean the person is somehow not very bright or has some difficulty understanding you. "To get your point across" is something that we would probably use more in a debate or a discussion or a formal presentation to someone.

Blaire says, "Okay, I'll follow your lead." "To follow (someone's) lead" (lead) means to do what another person is doing, to imitate someone else's behavior, to copy what they're doing, or to let them be the person that guides the conversation and you're going to listen to what they're saying and then try to say things that would be supportive of that. Blaire says, "just don't say anything insulting...like last time." Antonio says, "Are you bringing that up again?!" "To bring (something) up," or "to bring up (something)" is another two-word phrasal verb meaning to talk about something from the past, to introduce a new topic. It



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

could mean either of those things. “Don’t bring that up again” means don’t talk about that negative or bad situation from the past. You can also use “bring up” to mean introduce a new topic of conversation: “I’d like to bring up something we haven’t discussed yet.” So, it can mean both things.

Well, obviously Antonio did something in the past that Blaire is referring to – that Blaire is talking about. He says, “It’s not my fault that the entire town misinterpreted what I said!” Obviously, Antonio had another problem in using a foreign language, some negative thing that happened that Blaire is bringing up again. He says, “It’s not my fault that the entire town misinterpreted what I said!” “To misinterpret” means to misunderstand, to think that someone is saying something different than what they really are. Antonio says, “I was trying to compliment the women, not insult them.” So apparently, we can only guess, Antonio said something about some women. He was trying to say something nice about them – something complimentary, but he probably didn’t know the language very well and so he, instead, insulted them, said something negative about the women, wherever they were.

Blaire says, “Tell that to the men who ran you out of town!” “To run (someone) out of town” means to make someone leave your city or your town, usually because they have done something wrong and no one wants them there anymore. Blaire is saying that Antonio thinks that he was misinterpreted, but she says that the people who misinterpreted him would have a different opinion. So, “Tell that to the men who ran you out of town” means tell that to the men who were angry at what he had said about the women in this particular place.

Now let’s listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of dialogue]

Blaire: Do you have any idea what he’s saying?

Antonio: It’s Greek to me. You’re supposed to be the one who’s fluent. Can’t you make out what he’s saying?

Blaire: I never said I was fluent. I said I could get by in the language. There’s a big difference.

Antonio: Why don’t you try saying something to him?

Blaire: What should I say?



ESL Podcast 521 – Describing Speech and Language Ability

Antonio: How about, “I don’t have a good command of the language. Could you please speak more slowly?”

Blaire: I don’t think speaking more slowly will help my comprehension. Besides, I only know a few stock phrases, and even those I can only say haltingly, if I don’t freeze up altogether.

Antonio: Give me the phrase book. I’ll see if I can get through to him.

Blaire: What are you going to say?

Antonio: I don’t know, but we’re two fairly articulate people. We should be able to cobble together a few sentences to get our point across, don’t you think?

Blaire: Okay, I’ll follow your lead, but, um, just don’t say anything insulting...like last time.

Antonio: Are you bringing that up again?! It’s not my fault that the entire town misinterpreted what I said! I was trying to compliment the women, not insult them.

Blaire: Tell that to the men who ran you out of town!

[end of dialogue]

The script for this episode was written by the fluent, Dr. Lucy Tse.

From Los Angeles, California, I’m Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us next time on ESL Podcast.

English as a Second Language Podcast is written and produced by Dr. Lucy Tse, hosted by Dr. Jeff McQuillan, copyright 2009 by the Center for Educational Development.