



TOPICS

Ask an American: Interpreters

Pronouncing years and punctuation marks, school leavers and dropouts

GLOSSARY

interpreter – a person who translates from one language to another as the words are spoken

* Interpreters must know both languages very well to do their work because you have to translate what people are saying while they're saying it, with no time to look up words in a dictionary.

to bring in – to hire; to arrange for someone to work somewhere for a period of time

* The company brought in some extra receptionists to answer the extra phone calls last week.

parent-teacher conference – a meeting between a teacher and a student's parents, to talk about the student's performance or behavior at school

* During the parent-teacher conference, the teacher said that Siobhan was doing very well in math, but wasn't doing as well in science.

work habits – how a person studies or works; how well a person studies or works

* The teacher told his students to improve their work habits by studying for at least two hours every night without listening to music or talking on the phone.

to follow directions – to do what another person tells one to do; to do what one is supposed to do

* Please follow the directions at the top of the page when you complete this form.

needs – things that one needs; things that one must have

* The manager said that his office's needs include more desks, chairs, and copiers.

progress – advancement; becoming better at something and moving ahead toward the end goal

* Moshe has shown a lot of progress in his English class this year.



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to border on – to be very close to doing something; to be very close to a certain way of being, acting, or feeling

* Mali was so happy that she was bordering on tears.

disservice – something that doesn't help; something that hurts another thing or person; something that makes another thing or person worse

* The city government does a disservice to its citizens when it doesn't repair its roads or bridges.

support – help; assistance

* Community members showed their support for their neighborhood by raising more than \$4,000 to fix up the park.

academics – related to education and school; subjects that are studied at school

* The university's best basketball player is very good at sports, but she needs help with her academics.

the last thing on (one's) mind – something that one isn't thinking about

* Getting married is the last thing on Jacquie's mind. She is focused on working and her career.

filler – short sounds or words that are used when one doesn't know what to say, or when one is searching for the correct word.

* My advice is, when you're giving a speech, don't use filler words, like "uh," "um," "er," and "you know."

punctuation mark – a non-letter symbol that is used in writing, such as “,? !- (&\$/' :; , used to separate ideas and sentences, or to tell readers where to pause

* Punctuation marks like exclamation points (!) can make your writing more exciting!

school leaver (British English) /dropout (American English) – a student who decides to stop going to school and does not graduate

* There aren't very many good jobs for high school dropouts because most companies want to hire people with more education.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

Punctuation Changes Everything

When writing in English, it is extremely important to use punctuation marks correctly. Sometimes just a small change in punctuation can change the entire meaning of the sentence!

For example, “consider” (look at) these two phrases that use the same words in the same order, but have different punctuation that changes the meaning.

*Woman, without her man, is nothing.
Woman! Without her, man is nothing.*

The first phrase means that a woman is nothing if she doesn't have a man in her life. The second phrase means that a man is nothing if he doesn't have a woman in his life. Even though they use the same words in the same order, they have “entirely” (completely) different meanings.

Here's another example of how punctuation can change the meaning of a phrase.

*The man dropped the bullet in his mouth.
The man dropped, the bullet in his mouth.*

A “bullet” is the piece of metal that comes out of a gun. The first phrase means that the man put the bullet into his mouth, and we can “assume” (believe) that the man is still alive. The second phrase means that the man “dropped,” or “fell to the floor,” meaning that he is lying on the floor with a bullet in his mouth, so we can assume that the man died when a bullet was shot from a gun into his mouth. As in our first example, these two phrases use the same words in the same order, but one comma entirely changes the meaning.



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 91.

This is ESL Podcast's English Café episode 91. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

On this Café, we're going to talk about interpreters for parents in the United States at our schools. This is another of our Ask an American episodes, where you get a chance to hear other voices speaking English at a native rate – at a normal speed – and then we'll go back and explain it. And as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started!

We're going to listen to some other speakers of English today and give you a chance to hear some different voices. Sometimes it is helpful to be able to see the words that people are saying, especially for an episode like this one. To do that, you can download a Learning Guide on our website at eslpod.com.

Our topic today is “interpreters.” “To interpret” has a couple of meanings in English. One meaning is to translate for someone who is talking, or speaking. So, you say something in one language, I then “translate it” – put it into the words of another language. A person who interprets is called an “interpreter” (interpreter). There was a movie recently, called The Interpreter, about a woman who worked at the United Nations. I think Nicole Kidman, the Australian actress, was the star of that movie.

Interpreters work in many different places. In the United States, as you know, there are many, many immigrants that speak different languages. Many times, immigrants who come here send their children to schools. The parents do not always have a very high level of English in order to communicate with their children's teachers. Many schools have interpreters to help the parents communicate with the teachers. Most of the parents do learn English, but many times it takes them a long time to learn enough to be able to communicate all they want to with the teachers, so the schools provide interpreters. In fact, there is a national, or federal, government organization, we would say an “agency,” that says that schools have to provide interpreters where possible. Many schools, of course, have maybe a dozen or more languages spoken at the school, so this is not always possible. But when there is a large group of parents, who speak a language other than English, a school will often bring in an



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interpreter. When we say “bring in,” we mean they will get an interpreter to come to the school.

American schools have something called “parent-teacher conferences.” “Parent-teacher conferences” are meetings between the parent and the teacher to talk about how their child – how their student – is doing. Usually we do this twice a year, it depends on the school. When I was a teacher – a high school teacher – we would have parent-teacher conferences four times a year, so the parents could come in and talk to the teacher about their child, and the teacher could tell the parent how the child was doing.

We're going to listen now to some parents and teachers talking about this problem of bringing in interpreters. First, we'll listen to a teacher who is talking to a parent about how their child is doing in her classroom. The student's name is German; he's a Russian student, or a student originally from Russia. His mother speaks Russian. Notice what the teacher says about the student, what he seems to be doing well. We'll listen first, and then we'll go back and explain it:

[recording] Female teacher: Well, let's get started on German. He is doing a good job at his work habits. In fact, he is very good at listening and following direction.

The teacher here is talking to the parent, telling the parent that her son has been doing a good job at work habits. “Work habits” (habits) would be getting their schoolwork done, finishing the things that the teacher gave them to do. The teacher also says that the student is very good at listening and following directions. “To follow directions” means to do what the teacher tells you to do, to listen to the teacher and do what he or she says. Let's listen again:

[recording] Female teacher: Well, let's get started on German. He is doing a good job at his work habits. In fact, he is very good at listening and following direction.

This next quote comes from one of the teachers that works at the school, talking out why interpreters are so important for the parent-teacher conferences:

[recording] Male teacher: Parents know their children best; they want what's best for their children. If we don't allow them to speak in a language that they're most comfortable with to talk about the needs of their child, or the progress of their child, then we're bordering on doing a disservice to parents if we have the option to provide the first language support.



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He speaks very quickly here; let's go back and talk about what he said. He starts by saying that parents know their children best; they want what's best for their children. So parents are the ones who should be able to decide what is good for the child. He says, "If we don't allow them" – the parents – "to speak in a language that they are most comfortable with to talk about the needs of their child, or the progress of their child," and then he continues.

Let's just take that first part: "If we don't allow them" – if we don't permit them to talk in their native language; in their first language; the language they speak best. "About the needs of their child" – "needs" (needs) here means things that are necessary for the child, things that the child needs. Notice it's a noun here, not a verb. We also hear about parents wanting to talk about the progress of their child, how well their child is doing. "Progress" is how you are getting better.

He says if we don't allow parents to speak in their first or native language, "then we are bordering on doing a disservice to parents." Two expressions there: "to be bordering (bordering) on something" means to be about to do or to be very close to doing something. A "disservice" (disservice) is the opposite of a "service." A "service" is something that you give to someone that's positive, something that you do to help them. A "disservice" would be something that you don't do that hurts the person or that does not help them. So, the teacher is saying here that if they don't allow the parents to speak in a language they are comfortable in, they are "bordering on doing a disservice" – they are getting close to actually hurting the parents. It doesn't say that they are doing a disservice; if you say, "we are bordering on something," you're saying that we're almost doing that but not quite – not yet.

Finally, he says that we should do this – allow the parents to speak in their native language – "if we have the option to provide first language support" – if there is a possibility of giving the parents first language support. "Support" here means help, so if we can help them in their first language to understand the teacher, then we should do that. Let's listen again to this quote:

[recording] Male teacher: Parents know their children best; they want what's best for their children. If we don't allow them to speak in a language that they're most comfortable with to talk about the needs of their child, or the progress of their child, then we're bordering on doing a disservice to parents if we have the option to provide the first language support.

Our last quote, from two teachers, talks about why it's so important for these immigrant parents to get information from the school using an interpreter:



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[recording] Male teacher: They're looking for a place to live; they're looking for food; they're looking for clothing; they're looking for work.

Female teacher: They're just looking for peace, so maybe academics is the last thing on their mind. But eventually, you know, through having interpreters, they can ask the questions and they can become involved.

The first teacher says that the parents are looking for a place to work; they're looking for clothes; they're looking for work. Those are needs that the immigrant parents have when they first arrive, especially. The second teacher, the woman, says, "They're just looking for peace, so maybe academics is the last thing on their mind." "Academics" refers to the study in school – what their children are studying in school. The expression "the last thing on their mind" (mind) means the thing that is least important; the thing that is not important. When someone says, "That's the last thing on my mind," they mean I'm not worried about that, that is not important to me right now because I have other, more important things to do.

The woman goes on to say that eventually, by having interpreters – "through having interpreters" – the parents can ask questions and they can become more involved in the school; they can become more active in the school. Let's listen one more time:

[recording] Male teacher: They're looking for a place to live; they're looking for food; they're looking for clothing; they're looking for work.

Female teacher: They're just looking for peace, so maybe academics is the last thing on their mind. But eventually, you know, through having interpreters, they can ask the questions and they can become involved.

There's one other thing you may have noticed, the woman uses the expression "you know." This is a very common, what we might call a "filler" in English. A "filler" (filler) is an expression we use when we are thinking, trying to think of something to say. Sometimes you will hear teenagers – younger speakers – use the expression "you know" almost in every sentence: "So, I said to him, you know, I really don't want to go, you know." Another use of "you know" is to get someone's attention, to say "listen to me."

Now let's answer a few of your questions.



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Our first question comes from Gladys (Gladys) from Columbia. Gladys wants to know how we pronounce years in English. For example: “This year is two thousand and seven,” or simply “two thousand seven.” You could also pronounce it “twenty-O-seven,” although I think that is less common. Usually we are looking for the shortest way to communicate the idea of the year. For example, the year 1-9-9-7 we would pronounce “nineteen-ninety-seven,” instead of “one thousand, nine hundred and ninety-seven.” It’s just easier to say, “nineteen-ninety-seven.”

Not everyone agrees on what the simplest or shortest way is to say a year. For a more detailed explanation of pronouncing hours and years, listen to English Café number 40 – four-zero – that was back in July of two thousand and six (2006) – last year – I talk about it more extensively – in more detail.

Our next question comes from Florent (Florent) in France. The question has to do with, also, pronunciation, this time pronouncing different symbols of punctuation, things that you will see written down. This one is easier to do if you take a look at the Learning Guide, where you can see these actual symbols.

The first punctuation mark or symbol would be what you put at the end of a sentence, that little dot or point is usually pronounced “period” “.”. The exception is in, for example, numbers; you may say “point” instead of “period,” so two-zero-point-three-four (20.34). If it’s a web address, we usually say “dot” (dot), but in a sentence, we normally say “period.” British English calls this a “full stop,” instead of “period.”

If you are asking a question, you would put a question mark “?” at the end of the sentence. If you are saying something that has a lot of emotion, we would put in an exclamation point “!”, which is a line and a little point underneath it, that’s an exclamation point.

The next two, parentheses “()” and brackets “[]” are what you put before and after a sentence that you are trying to separate from the other sentences. Parentheses are round, almost like the letter “O” but only half of it, and you put the first half before the sentence and the last half at the end of the sentence or phrase. Brackets are more like a square that you divide in two, half of it at one part of the phrase, half of it at the end. So, brackets and parentheses are similar.

The last two punctuation marks are colon “:” and semi-colon “;”, or semicolon. A colon, as a punctuation mark, is two dots, one on top of the other. A semicolon, or semi-colon, is a dot and then a comma “,” underneath. We haven’t talked



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about the comma, but the comma is also a common punctuation symbol. So those are the pronunciations of those symbols, period, question mark, exclamation point, parentheses, brackets, colon, and semicolon.

Our final question comes from Co (Co), currently living in California, originally from Vietnam. Co wants to know the meaning of the expression “school leavers” (leavers).

“School leavers” is a British English term. In American English, we would use the expression “dropouts” (dropouts). “School leavers,” or “dropouts,” are children that leave school before graduating, usually leaving high school before they get their certificate or their diploma. We may talk about a “high school dropout,” someone who didn’t finish or graduate from high school; a “college dropout,” someone who didn’t finish their college studies, and so forth.

Don’t be an ESL Podcast dropout; continue listening to us. We are always happy to answer your questions, as many as we can. You can email us at eslpod@eslpod.com.

From Los Angeles, California, I’m Jeff McQuillan. Thanks for listening. We’ll see you next time on the English Café.

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