

## TECHNOLOGY REVIEW

### *RachelsEnglish.com*

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## INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation training has increasingly been recognized for the important role it plays in making oral communication intelligible and meaningful for both listeners and speakers (Levis, 2017). This recognition is in part responsible for the growing number of online resources such as websites, blogs, and online courses that offer some kind of pronunciation support. Some of these platforms only have lists with learning tips while others provide audio and video tutorials and some can interact with learners. A closer look at these resources can help us see what they can and cannot do, and this is our aim as we look at one very popular online resource known as Rachel's English.

### Overview

[Rachel's English](#) is a combined website, podcast, and online course on speaking and pronunciation instruction with a focus on American English. It provides over 400 free instructional videos that cover topics such as how to pronounce each sound in the IPA chart and how to work on rhythm, intonation, linking, and stress when uttering words, phrases, sentences, and larger units of speech. The intended audience includes "non-native speakers wanting to work on their spoken English for job advancement or to pass a test; teachers, native and non-native alike, who teach ESL; Americans who have suffered a stroke and need resources to re-learn the movements of the mouth when speaking English" (Rachel's English, 2018). Users can subscribe to a [newsletter](#) and be notified of updates and additions to website content, such as new videos. Rachel's English [YouTube](#) channel boasted 1.9 million subscribers and over 90 million views as of April 2019. The accompanying [Facebook](#) page had approximately 329,000 followers and 319,000 likes around the same time period. The [website](#) is a hub from which users can access several different resources (see Figure 1). The top of the website's homepage has links with labels such as Videos, Courses, Podcast and (external) Resources, each of which will be briefly discussed in this review.

**J RACHEL'S ENGLISH**

Rachel's online school is OPEN! Join [Rachel's English Academy](#) or buy Rachel's eBook, [American English Pronunciation](#), to supercharge your conversational English.

HOME VIDEOS COURSES LESSONS BOOK PODCAST ABOUT CONTACT RESOURCES

At Rachel's English, you'll find everything you need to speak better English.

Over 400 FREE videos that teach:

- The **sounds** of American English
- The **keys** to conversational English: [rhythm, intonation, linking, and stress](#)

Learn how these concepts work together to speak confidently and be easily understood while improving listening comprehension. Study [how Americans really speak](#).

Let's have fun learning English together.

Search this website ...

VIDEO CATEGORIES

The Voice: [Basics](#), [Placement](#)

Sounds: [IPA, Alphabet, and Letters, Vowels, Diphthongs, Consonants](#)

Intonation, Linking, Rhythm, and Stress: [In a Word, In a Sentence, Linking, Melody, Contractions, Words that Reduce, Suffixes and Prefixes](#)

Conversation: [Specific Words, Phrases, Conversation and Speech Studies, Community](#)

POPULAR VIDEOS RECENT VIDEOS RECENT VIDEOS

Figure 1. Rachel's English homepage.

## Videos

Users are encouraged to watch the instructional videos by going to Rachel's English [YouTube](#) channel which provides themed playlists with labels such as *IPA*, *Contractions*, *Words that Reduce*, *Intonation*, and *The Dark L*. Users can also watch the videos from within the website, which is particularly helpful for learners and instructors who are located in countries where YouTube is blocked. The website presents the videos grouped thematically by category and subcategory as shown in Figure 2. For example, the category *The Voice* contains the subcategories *Basics* and *Placement*. A click on *Basics* leads users to a set of videos covering basic concepts for studying pronunciation such as the difference between voiced and unvoiced consonants, the anatomy of the voice, and exercises to relax the vocal apparatus. A click on *Placement* gives access to a set of videos that discuss where sounds are placed in American English and where the voice resonates in the body.

## VIDEO CATEGORIES

The Voice: [Basics](#), [Placement](#)

Sounds: [IPA](#), [Alphabet](#), [and Letters](#),

[Vowels](#), [Diphthongs](#), [Consonants](#)

Intonation, Linking, Rhythm, and Stress: [In a Word](#), [In a Sentence](#), [Linking](#), [Melody](#), [Contractions](#), [Words that Reduce](#), [Suffixes and Prefixes](#)

Conversation: [Specific Words](#), [Phrases](#), [Conversation and Speech Studies](#), [Community](#)

Figure 2. Video categories and subcategories.

As can be seen in Figure 3, Rachel uses video note-taking technology to demonstrate how learners can take notes on an audio or video clip. She suggests learners obtain the transcription of a spoken segment so that they can practice indicating where prominence, linking and reduction occur in a phrase or sentence. In one of the videos, Rachel uses IPA phonetic transcription and prosody annotation conventions that are typically found in pronunciation coursebooks such as Grant (2001) and Celce-Murcia et al. (2010).

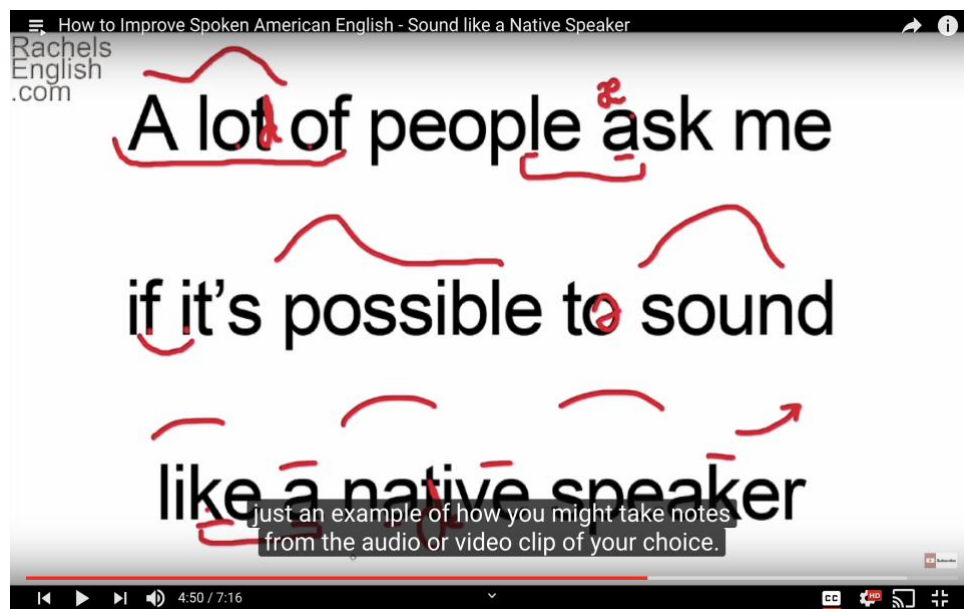


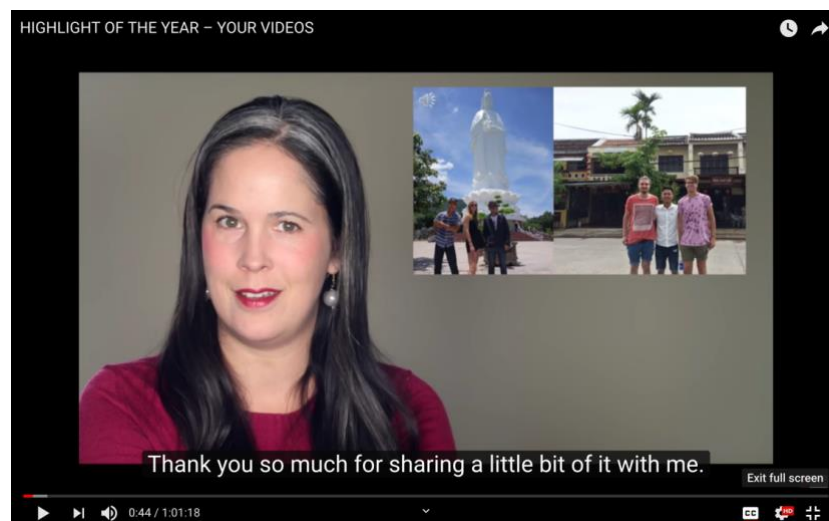
Figure 3. A demonstration of how learners can annotate prominence, linking, and reduction in transcribed text.

Another aspect of Rachel's English pronunciation teaching approach is her use of videos in which she engages in real-life conversations with friends and family members. She elicits authentic language from these interactions and she video records and transcribes them for instructional purposes. She then uses these materials to show her learners what unscripted speech sounds like and how it can be annotated and analyzed for pronunciation learning purposes. In one of the [videos](#) (see Figure 4), Rachel demonstrates how her father pronounces an individual word ("space"), an idiom ("booted out"), and a lexical bundle ("often from home") in casual conversation.



*Figure 4.* Pronunciation analysis of informal conversation by native speakers of American English.

One of the strategies Rachel uses to create and maintain her online learner community includes posting video [challenges](#) and encouraging learners to respond by sharing their own videos. As an example, in the [Highlight](#) of the Year challenge (see Figure 5), learners from several parts of the world shared short videos about their personal highlights.



*Figure 5.* Learners participate by sharing videos in response to challenges posted by Rachel.

## Courses

Rachel's English also offers online courses to its users. To learn more about this feature, I signed up for a course named *Accent Mini-Course 1: The Character of American English*. This is a 6-part mini-course with 3-minute videos in which Rachel explains where sounds are placed in American English and where the voice resonates in the body, which is the same content of one of the videos in the *Placement* category that was described earlier. She then asks learners to practice placing those sounds in their body by imitating her as she speaks and demonstrates. Other available courses with titles such as “International Phonetic Alphabet”, “Pronunciation: Foundation”, and “Vowels + Diphthongs” are available in Rachel’s English [Academy](#), which is Rachel’s paid online learning website. This review, however, only describes and discusses the resources that are offered free of charge in Rachel’s English.

## Podcast

Rachel's English [podcast](#) has a more conversational and less instructional format. The goal of the podcast is to offer non-native English speakers the opportunity to listen to idioms, phrasal verbs and vocabulary typically used in informal conversations by native speakers of American English. The themes are varied and include conversations about American English slang, New Year’s resolutions, the different pronunciations of the phoneme /t/, and interviews with English learners and instructors. Free downloadable transcriptions of each podcast are available to users.

## Resources

Rachel uses her English [resources](#) page to encourage learners to seek examples of American English on the web for listening comprehension and imitation practice, and for annotating and analyzing language samples. To that end, Rachel recommends four online resources. [TED Talks](#) videos are recommended for their variety in topics and length, interactive transcripts, and subtitles in many languages. The U.S. Public TV Broadcasting Service ([PBS](#)) is highlighted for its closed captioning and extensive collection of TV programs for children. [Praat](#), a free-downloadable voice analysis software, is recommended for learners who are interested in studying different aspects of the human voice. Finally, [iTalki](#) is recommended for learners who want to hire native speaker teachers to help them with grammar, test preparation, or business English.

## EVALUATION

The freely available materials in Rachel's English have the potential to help learners and instructors of English as a second or foreign language (L2 English) to improve their speaking and pronunciation of American English. The website provides a wealth of instructional materials that learners can use for self-paced learning. Rachel’s demonstrations of how users can listen to, annotate, and analyze spoken words, phrases, and sentences can equip learners and instructors with strategies and tools to explore content beyond what is available in her website. The organization of videos in categories, subcategories and playlists, and the availability of podcasts and courses can also be helpful to instructors and learners who want to focus on specific features of English speaking and pronunciation. Rachel’s demonstrations of how to use IPA phonetic transcription and how to annotate prosody can also be helpful to users.

Rachel's approach to teaching pronunciation includes enunciating words, phrases and sentences so that the pronunciation features she is demonstrating sound as clear as possible. She paces herself as she explains the content, and she teaches discrete sounds in isolation at first and then as part of a larger unit of speech. This makes her speech a little slower than what would be usual for a native speaker, but it is still fast enough to be perceived as regular speech. This allows for learners to use imitation techniques such as shadowing or mirroring (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Derwing & Munro, 2015) to practice the sounds they hear.

L2 English learners at the intermediate or advanced level can probably make better use of the materials available in Rachel's English. However, learner participation in the video challenge activities showed that participants with limited English did engage with the materials at some level. This points to the possibility that low-proficiency learners could better benefit from the video lessons by working with L2 English instructors with some pronunciation training experience.

The resources available in Rachel's English do not offer any capabilities that allow users to interact and receive feedback on their pronunciation. Learners and instructors who seek this kind of interactive feedback would need to use Rachel's English in combination with online language learning platforms such as <https://www.busuu.com/>, which offer their users the possibility to interact with and provide feedback to other users.

All things considered, Rachel's English can be a valuable resource for pronunciation learning and instruction. One aspect that needs to be considered is that pronunciation courses for teachers are still not widely available, and many L2 English instructors report having insecurities on how to teach pronunciation to their learners (Burri et al., 2017; Couper, 2016). The instructional videos provided in Rachel's English can, in this sense, be used as a supplementary tool to other L2 English pronunciation instruction materials. Used in combination, these resources can help L2 English instructors work on pronunciation awareness, intelligibility, accent, accuracy, segmentals, suprasegmentals, learners' affective filters and other pronunciation issues.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Liberato Silva dos Santos, MA, is a PhD student in the Applied Linguistics and Technology program at Iowa State University. He researches language testing with a special focus on performance assessments of oral abilities (listening and speaking) in L2 English tests. His other research interests include investigating computer-assisted language learning (CALL) applications that can help promote student learning and instructors' professional development.

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