

44 - Lori makes a terrible mistake

Hi English learners! Lori here, your teacher from Better at English dot com.

It's story time here today, something I don't think I've done here on the podcast before. I'm going to use natural English, but will try to speak just a little more carefully than I normally would, so that more people can follow along.

You can find the full transcript of everything I say on my website:

www.betteratenglish.com/transcripts

Today I've been thinking about mistakes, mainly how the fear of making mistakes in English really holds some learners back. Believe me, I know how this feels. I've made plenty of embarrassing mistakes myself in my target languages. Luckily, most of the time I'm able to just laugh them off, and they don't really get me into trouble. But sometimes mistakes lead to a total breakdown of communication. And that's no fun at all.

I thought you might like to hear about one of my more memorable mistakes, a mistake that actually caused a real problem and made me feel super embarrassed. It happened over 30 years ago, (yes, I'm that old) but it taught me such an important lesson about language learning that I still remember it to this day.

So let me take you back over thirty years, to my first year living in Sweden. I think I'd been living there for about nine months when this happened. I'd been trying to learn Swedish since I arrived, and by then I was able to understand a fair amount. I think I could speak without too much difficulty about general, everyday things. I still made tons of mistakes, for sure, but they didn't really cause problems. That is, until this one particular day.

Here's the situation: I needed to make a doctor's appointment for some kind of check-up. I can't remember what it was for; I just remember that it wasn't for anything urgent. It was early in April, maybe April third or fourth. I picked up the phone and called the doctor's office to make an appointment. It was

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scary. I'd never made a phone call like that in Swedish before. I was worried that I would embarrass myself by making terrible mistakes or just not understanding, and that I would end up having to try to do it in English. Most people in Sweden speak English, which is one of the reasons I wasn't learning faster. But I was determined to make this appointment in Swedish, gosh darn it!

Despite my worries, it seemed to go well. The doctors' assistant answered, and I was able to explain what I needed and make an appointment for April 18th at 9., that's nine o'clock in the morning. I hung up feeling pretty proud of myself: this was the first time I'd ever made a phone call like this in Swedish -- calling a total stranger to make an appointment -- and I didn't have to use any English at all. It felt like a real sign of progress!

I got out my calendar, found April 18th and wrote: Dr's appointment, 9 am. I was a bit annoyed that I would have to wait two weeks for my appointment, but like I said, it wasn't urgent. I closed my calendar and went on with my day, feeling very pleased with myself about my successful phone call in Swedish.

Now....Fast forward to 3 or 4 days later, April 8th just after 9 am. I was at home in my little apartment, drinking coffee and getting ready to go to the gym when the phone rang. I picked up the phone, hoping that it would be something nice -- maybe a friend calling to find out if we could do something fun that day, I don't know. But it wasn't. It was someone from the doctor's office, a woman who sounded mildly annoyed, calling to find out why I hadn't shown up for my appointment.

That was a shock to me, because I thought my appointment was not for another 10 days, on the 18th. I couldn't imagine that I'd written down the wrong day by mistake. "Are you sure?" I asked her. "I thought it was on the 18th... that's almost two weeks from now." And then it hit me: today was the 8th. The words for eighth and eighteenth sound quite similar in Swedish if, like me at the time, you haven't developed your ear so well. So the person who I

had spoken to before had said the eighth, but I had understood -- and written down -- the eighteenth. It was a stupid, basic mistake on my part.

It was so embarrassing. I was mortified. Swedes are very punctual, and it's really bad form to be late to appointments, and even worse to just not show up.

Thankfully, the secretary was very kind about it. When she realized how embarrassed I was about my stupid mistake, her annoyance vanished. We made a new appointment, checking very carefully that I really understood the time and date. We did this by saying not only the date, but the name of the day. For example, "Thursday April 20th" instead of just "the 20th." She also said that she wouldn't charge me the normal fee they charge when people don't show up, because she could tell that it had been an honest mistake. That was a relief, because I was living on a student loan at the time and really needed every bit of money just to get by.

So, why am I telling you this story? Because it taught me a really important lesson about mistakes in language learning. We all hate making mistakes. We fear making mistakes, and I am no exception. But this experience taught me that not all mistakes are equal. Not all mistakes cause a total breakdown of communication. Not all mistakes have real-world consequences.

People can overlook all kinds of mistakes. Grammar mistakes, odd choices of vocabulary, having to invent your own vocabulary or put words together in strange ways because that's all the language you have, that's all fine. You can still communicate and connect with people even when you make loads of mistakes.

But then there are mistakes that can cause trouble. In my experience, some of the most serious mistakes are when you mix up numbers, letters, dates and times. These are mistakes that can really cause problems. Some classic examples in English are mixing up Tuesday and Thursday, mixing up teens and tens, for example thirteen and thirty, ninety and nineteen. And then there's other time expressions like next Wednesday vs. this Wednesday.

And don't even get me started on one of the most confusing ones: saying "half seven" or "half four" in English for times of the day. In British English, "half seven" is short for "half past seven" or 7.30. But in Swedish and I believe German and Dutch as well, "half seven" means 6.30, not 7.30. That's grounds for some real confusion if, say, a Brit and a Swede are arranging to meet at "half seven" in English.

And let's not forget the basic alphabet. Sometimes we need to spell out important things like email addresses. For instance, my email address is lori@betteratenglish.com. There are many ways to spell Lori. I can spell out my name for you, but if I say L O R I and you write L O R Y, I'll never get your email. And yes, this has happened to me many times and caused a lot of frustration when I've had to call people back and give them my email address again. It's also happened that people have spelled their own email address wrong in English when they've been saying it to me.

So to sum up, mistakes are an unavoidable part of language learning, and it's important that you don't let the fear of making mistakes silence you and keep you from speaking. And most of the time, despite less-than-perfect English, you're still able to connect with people and communicate. But having said that, it's still a good idea to make sure that you have the basics covered, things like of numbers, dates, times and spelling. That will help you avoid embarrassing situations like missing appointments, ordering the wrong quantities of things, getting people's email addresses wrong, etc. Basics are boring, I know, but they're actually pretty important.

Are there any English basics that you think you might need to practice? I wouldn't be surprised, because I've had plenty of students who could speak quite fluently but still made simple mistakes with spelling and numbers. That's all for this time...here's wishing you an inspired and productive day, wherever and whenever you happen to be listening to this. Bye for now!