

40

Where Can We Hear Good English?

LISTENING TO ENGLISH on TV programmes is not the best way to learn to speak correct English. Sometimes they use colloquial English, which may not be understandable. For example, some speakers use the London accent (Cockney), or if they are from Scotland, or from Yorkshire or Tyneside, they may be difficult to understand. That is unavoidable.

It is good if students can become accustomed to hearing those different accents, but for some it may be better to listen to the local English TV channels, especially the professional British news readers. Some of the Chinese news-readers on ATV or TVB know English very well, but unfortunately some spoil their English speaking because of poor intonation.

We all know that Chinese written characters have a special tone, and if we use the wrong tone, the meaning of the character is quite different. However, English also uses tones. Certain syllables in words are spoken in a higher tone. Let me give an example. A French friend of mine was looking for a post office. He asked a small English boy, “Can you tell me the way to the post *office*?” Because he emphasized “office” in a higher tone, the boy could not understand him, even though the Frenchman repeated it several times. Eventually, the French friend wrote

down the two words. Then the boy said. “Oh, you want the *post* office. It’s just along the street.”

Unfortunately, many TV news-readers emphasize wrong syllables like roof-*top*, or stock *exchange*, instead of *roof*-top and *stock* exchange.

In introducing a popular Sunday evening TV programme, someone, obviously an English-speaking person, always says “*contributors*” or “*contributors*” instead of “*contributors*”. Also, in the daily news bulletin, many words are wrongly spelt in the English dubbing such as “*seperate*” instead of “*separate*”. Sometimes non-existent words are used. Maybe the broadcasters do not have enough time to correct the dubbings, in which case they may be excused – but that does not help students to learn correct English.

Admittedly, TV English is a million times better than my Chinese. However, I think that Hong Kong students could improve their English greatly if those employed on broadcasting were to speak correctly, and train new recruits to do so. It is useless to complain about the English standard in Hong Kong, if students listen to the news to improve their English, but hear all the same mistakes that they themselves make.