



All Ears English Episode 172:

Homophones to Push Your English to the Next Level

Lindsay: This is an All Ears English Podcast, Episode 172: “Homophones to Push Your English to the Next Level.”

Gabby: In this episode, you’ll meet Tim Torkildson, ESL blogger, fired for blogging about homophones. In this episode, you’ll learn what they are and why.

[Instrumental]

Gabby: Welcome to the All Ears English Podcast, where you’ll finally get real, native English conversation with your hosts, Lindsay McMahon, the ‘English Adventurer’ and Gabby Wallace, the ‘Language Angel’, from Boston, USA.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: Gabby, do you know that we just reached 4 million downloads on the All Ears English podcast?

Gabby: Whoa! 4 million downloads. That’s like the population of Los Angeles.

Lindsay: I know, it’s unbelievable. We want to say “Thank You” to you guys for getting us to this 4 million downloads. That is awesome!



Gabby: Yeah! So keep listening and keep leaving reviews. We love reading your feedback on All Ears English.

Lindsay: Yeah, and we want to say, “Thank You”, real quickly to a couple of reviewers. We want to say thanks to **Ki5963**, Thanks to **BNS16377** in Vietnam, **Malot** in Spain, and **Nancy Lin** in China, Thanks guys.

Gabby: Thanks so much.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: Gabby, can you believe that All Ears English has been around for a year.

Gabby: It has been almost a whole year. Oh, my gosh! It’s amazing.

Lindsay: And it’s awesome. Our community is growing. We wanna (want to) thank you guys.

Gabby: Yeah, we love putting on the All Ears English show. But you know what, it’s in danger.

Lindsay: Why?

Gabby: It’s in danger because we need your help to keep going. We need your support. We’ve started a Kickstarter campaign that will help to fund the All Ears English. All the episodes are going to continue to be free for you, but we need your help to fund our Kickstarter campaign to keep going. The deadline is October 1, 2014, and you can go find our campaign on our website AllEarsEnglish.com/Kickstarter.

[Instrumental]

Gabby: Hey, Lindsay.

Lindsay: Hey, Gabby.

Gabby: How you doing?

Lindsay: Very well, thank you. And you?



Gabby: Awesome. Well, I am doing great. I'm so excited. We have a special guest with us today, Tim Torkildson, ESL blogger. Tim, how are you doing?

Tim: I'm doing fine. How are you two doing? You sound so perky.

Gabby: Oh, we're just...

Lindsay: Oh, thank you.

Gabby: ...we're happy to have you here. We love being able to talk to experts in their fields like you. (You know), you're an ESL blogger and I'm just so psyched to have you on All Ears English.

Lindsay: Yeah, thanks for coming Tim.

Tim: Well, thank you for having me. I look forward to, (uh), talking to some ESL people again. It's been a while since I've had that opportunity.

Gabby: Yeah, well, great. It's our pleasure. So I know you're, you're considered an, an expert in the area of homophones or homophones, some people pronounce it a little differently. So I'll say homophones. (Um), we'd like to ask you for some examples. First of all, even before the examples, what is a homophone?

Tim: Well, a homophone basically is, is a, a word that it sounds the same, but has several different spellings, and several different meanings.

Gabby: Oh, okay.

Lindsay: (Mm).

Gabby: So, I know, (like), I got some questions recently from English students. (Uh), one, one asked me, oh, "What is the difference between the pronunciation of, (um), that, (uh), the-the grain, flour, (right), the (you know), the flour, that you, (um), make cookies with or cakes with and, and the, the plants, what you give your, your girlfriend or boyfriend, or mother, that kind of flower?" And I think this is really confusing for ESL students because you see different spellings, and English is just weird. The vowel sounds are weird. So let's clear up some of this confusion today.



Lindsay: Yeah, this is the ultimate Achilles heel when it comes to learning English, isn't it?

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: Spelling.

Tim: Yeah, it can, it can, it can be very, very confusing and especially, it's, it's confusing even for us Native English speakers.

Gabby: Right.

Tim: (Uh), when it comes to words like 'ant', which is the insect...

Lindsay: Ah.

Tim: ...and then is it 'aunt' the relative, or is it 'aunt' the relative?

Lindsay: I was wondering about that too.

Gabby: I think it's regional difference.

Tim: Yeah, you get, you get into regional dialects and (uh), boy, it, it can start to be messy. I've always advised my ESL students to just accept the fact that, that this, this exists in English and to take a little time each day or maybe once a week to memorize some of the more common homophones, so that they kind of know what they are. Now, (uh), as far as examples go, there's, there's just so many. (Uh), we can start with, with, with something very basic, very simple like *see*.

Both: (Uh).

Tim: Now, I *see* you...

Gabby: Yes,

Lindsay: (Uh-hm).

Tim: And that's spelled s-e-e. A very common word, everybody knows that.

Gabby: Yep.



Tim: (Um), another, another word, another homophone for that would be, "I'm going to go swim in the sea."

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: (Uh-huh).

Lindsay: Ooh! Tricky.

Gabby: S-e-a.

Tim: Yeah, now different spelling and completely different meaning, but there is absolutely no difference in pronunciation. There are no regional differences. (I mean), everybody who speaks English, says see.

Gabby: That's right. Yeah.

Tim: It's very simple.

Gabby: That's a good one, yeah.

Tim: (Uh), you-you-you-you-you can keep going there, (the-), (uh), other ones would include (uh), oh, (you know), "I pause to lick my paws."

Both: Oh.

Gabby: So 'pause'.

Lindsay: Right. "I see the sea," and "I pause to lick my paws."

Tim: A dog might say that.

Gabby: Right.

Tim: "I pause to lick my paws." *Pause* means, (you know), to, to, to delay, to stop for a moment.

Gabby: P-a-u...

Tim: P-a-u-s-e.

Gabby: Right.



Lindsay: Yeah.

Tim: That's how you spell it. **Paws**, of course, are, (you know), at the end of the leg of a dog or a cat.

Gabby: Right.

Tim: Your-your-your singular is *paw*, and your plural would be *paws*.

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: I think this is difficult for a lot of (um), of English learners because when you have the two different vowels like the p-a-u-s-e, the tendency is to want to pronounce each separately like 'pa-us'.

Lindsay: Oh.

Gabby: Right. I've heard this before anyway. I'm not just making things, up, (um), but...

Tim: Well, I, I've heard it pronounced 'pow-us'.

Lindsay: Right. That's different.

Gabby: Maybe, I was, I was exaggerating a little bit, but 'pow-us'. Yeah, so we (kind of) smush those vowels together and they get turned into one sound, pause.

Lindsay: What's another example, Tim?

Tim: Well, like Jimmy Durante used to say, "I've got a million of 'em (them)."

Gabby: Oh, that's cool.

Tim: (Uh), lemme (let me) just, just (uh) – well here, let's do a three decker, triple decker here.

Lindsay: Ooh, great.

Gabby: Oh, boy.



Lindsay: It gets more complicated.

Tim: We'll, we'll, we'll stretch your listeners, (uh), intelligence to the limit here...

Gabby: Excellent.

Tim: ...and ability.

Lindsay: Challenge them.

Tim: Okay. (Uh), this homophone is air. Air.

Lindsay: Oh.

Tim: Now, we all breathe *air*, and that's spelled a-i-r.

Gabby: Yes.

Tim: Now, if we make a mistake, "Well, to *err* is human, to forgive, divine."

Gabby: Yes.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: Great.

Lindsay: How do we spell that?

Tim: To err, err, in this case, which is to make a mistake, is spelled e-r-r.

Lindsay: (Mm).

Gabby: (Mm-hm).

Tim: Now, there is a third one and this one trips even Native English speakers up from time to time. *Heir*, is someone who will inherit...

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: Yes.

Tim: ...something.



Lindsay: (Uh-hm).

Tim: So for instance, “So when my parents passed away, I became an *heir* to...” – well in my case, a couple of debts is what I became heir too. But, but (uh), (uh), you, you inherit things. If you have inherited something or will inherit something...

Gabby: Yeah.

Tim: You are an *heir*. Now, this is spelled h-e-i-r.

Lindsay: Oh, boy.

Tim: And, common sense would just indicate that you’d want to say *hair*.

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: [Indiscernible 08:38] would be a different word.

Gabby: Because of the ‘h’.

Tim: Yeah. [Indiscernible 08:40]. It’s heir.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: Ooh, this is the pro-level one.

Gabby: Right. And, and...

Tim: Yeah, that’s, that, that I think is probably one of the trickiest homophones that’s on the list.

Gabby: Yeah.

Tim: I’m just scanning around to see if there’s any other three decker’s. Here’s another three decker.

Gabby: Great.

Tim: Lets, let’s see if your listeners can keep up with us on this one. (Um), (uh), the word *wrapped*.



Gabby: Wrapped.

Lindsay: Ooh.

Gabby: Oh, interesting. Yeah, I can see where this is going.

Tim: “Now, now, at Christmas time we get all of our presents *wrapped* in Christmas paper.”

Gabby: (Mm-hm).

Lindsay: (Mm-hm).

Tim: It’s wrapped. That is spelled w-r-a-p-p-e-d.

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: (Mm).

Tim: It’s wrapped in paper. Now, if we adore something, if we’re hypnotized by something...

Lindsay: (Uh-hm).

Gabby: Yeah.

Tim: ..we are *rapt*. Rapt.

Gabby: Yeah, rapt by...

Tim: Sounds exactly the same and that is spelled r-a-p-t.

Lindsay: Ooph.

Tim: Rapt.

Lindsay: Totally different.

Tim: And of course, the third one is, (you know), if you’re driving along here – I can’t do it very good, but (uh) – well, I tell you what, there’s, there’s four meanings, but we’re gonna (going to) confuse people too much. So I’ll tell you what. Let’s go back in time, let’s hop in our time machine and go back



to the root word 'rap', r-a-p. Now, that has reference today, to a musical style, a musical signature...

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: (Mm-hm).

Tim: ...but prior to that, (uh), if you *rapped* something...

Gabby: Oh.

Tim: ...that meant that you hit it.

Gabby: Right. Like to rap at the door.

Lindsay: Oh.

Tim: If one of your ESL students is not paying attention, you *rapped* them on the head with your knuckles.

Lindsay: Oh, wow.

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: That word, I haven't heard that lately.

Tim: That's spelled r-a-p-p-e-d.

Gabby: Right.

Tim: So all three are exactly the same in pronunciation. They're totally different...

Gabby: Different meaning.

Tim: ...in meaning.

Gabby: Isn't that fascinating.

Lindsay: Tricky.

Gabby: That is so fascinating.



Lindsay: This is one of the things that makes English sometimes a little bit hard and challenging, but it can be fun.

Gabby: But interesting and fun too. It's like a puzzle. It's (like), (you know), these examples you're giving us, just illustrate how interesting the language can be and the sounds might be the same, but we have different spellings, different meanings – and I don't know, to me it sounds like...

Lindsay: You can play around with it.

Gabby: Yeah, it sounds like fun.

Tim: Oh, it can be a lot of fun and, of course...

Gabby: Yeah.

Tim: ...it's the basis of, of all of our puns...

Gabby: Yes.

Lindsay: Right.

Gabby: Oh, my gosh.

Lindsay: Yes.

Tim: ...and innumerable jokes...

Lindsay: We did an episode on, on...

Tim: ...on homophone. You can just make them up as you go along.

Gabby: Yeah.

Tim: Now, what I find very interesting about all this is, (um), I ask myself, (uh) a number of years ago, how many other languages have this same, (uh), this same characteristic.

Gabby: (Uh-huh), interesting question.

Tim: Now, I-I found out that both German and French really don't have it.



Gabby: Oh.

Tim: It-it doesn't exist for them, but because I lived in Thailand and learned how to speak Thai, when I was teaching ESL, I found out that they do have it.

Gabby: Oh, interesting.

Lindsay: Okay.

Tim: Homophones exist in Thai.

Gabby: Huh. Okay, so...

Tim: Words that are pronounced exactly the same are spelled differently and have different meanings.

Lindsay: (Mm-hm).

Gabby: That's interesting.

Tim: Also, also – (uh), well, I was going to say Chinese, but it's not (Chi-). It's, it's a dialect in Chinese and I'm trying – it's Cantonese.

Lindsay: Okay.

Gabby: So...

Tim: Cantonese also has, has some of that as well. (Uh)....

Gabby: So some languages have homophones, some don't...

Tim: (Yeah).

Gabby: But if you're coming from a language that doesn't have homophones, that's –it's really important for you to understand what it is and that they occur quite often in English.

Lindsay: Be ready for them.

Gabby: Yeah. So we, we wanted to concentrate on the homophones for this episode, but we also want to talk about your recent experience that's



related to the word homophone. It's very similar. I think the word homophone and your blog post about homophones, got you in a little bit of a, an interesting situation. Could you tell us quickly about what happened?

Tim: Well, yeah, it got me in a little bit of hot water. Now, (um), I was working at a, at an, at a language school...

Gabby: (Uh-huh).

Tim: ...as a social media person.

Gabby: Okay.

Tim: So one of my jobs was to write blogs about the English language, about grammar, about spelling, (uh), about different characters about the language.

Gabby: Yeah.

Tim: Now, I was always careful to write these blogs, (you know), just straightforward, (uh), not, not make them funny or, or, or sly, put in innuendo or anything like that because, (uh), they were aimed at foreign-speaking students.

Lindsay: (Uh-hm).

Tim: So I didn't want to confuse them, (um), with any double talk or anything like that. So when I decided to do something on homophones, I realized, well you got to be especially careful here, careful here because of that prefix homo.

Gabby: Right. What does homo mean as a prefix?

Tim: It-it-it just means the same.

Gabby: Right.

Tim: It means one.



Gabby: Same sounds or...?

Tim: Single. Yeah, it's, it's – homophone is the same sound.

Gabby: Right.

Tim: Same sound basically. So I-I simply wrote a blog using examples, such as the ones we've been talking about today.

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: (Uh-hm).

Tim: ...and explaining the differences between them, giving examples of how to use, (uh), these homophones in sentences using them correctly, so on and so forth. Well, (um), I didn't really hear anything back about that particular about that blog for several days. And then much to my surprise, (uh), I was called into the office by the (uh), owner of the language school, and (uh), he told me that he was going to let me go. (Uh), among other reasons, he said he did not care for the, the homophone blog. He was afraid that, (uh), some students, some foreign students might feel that, that it had something to do with the gay agenda.

Gabby: Oh, boy.

Tim: And he just couldn't, yeah, he couldn't take that chance.

Gabby: Well....

Tim: And I was, I was pretty, pretty astounded. I didn't, I didn't really say much. (Um), I just let him, (you know), finish what he wanted to say and then we shook hands and I cleaned out my desk and got my final paycheck. And, so I've been, I've been looking for another ESL job since.

Gabby: Wow. What a, what an experience. I just want to back up a minute, (uh), and explain, (um), (you know), for, for our English learners that homophone is almost, very similar to the word 'homophobe', (um), or homosexual, which also means gay. So just in case, (you know), we need to build a vocabulary there...



Lindsay: I think that homophobe means a fear of...

Gabby: Yeah, the fear of being gay.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: Exactly.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: And then, (um), homosexual would be being gay. So, your, (uh), the school you worked at were –what they were afraid that people would have a reaction on this topic.

Lindsay: (Mm-hm).

Tim: Yeah.

Gabby: So, (you know), this is really interesting because in the US, I think, (um), we have a great progressive system, legal system in some states where, (you know), you can, you can have same sex marriage, and we're, we're quite open about being homosexual. But, of course, there are also people who are not okay with that and quite sensitive about the topic. So it's interesting I think because there's such a divide. I – there's such a divide between, (um), (kind of) right and left or...

Lindsay: (Uh-huh).

Gabby: ...conservative and liberal.

Lindsay: Right, within different regions of the country.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: Here in Boston, is very progressive.

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: Gay marriage is legal in Massachusetts and a lot of other states in New England, whereas other parts of the US, like in the south, it's a lot more conservative and potentially in parts of the West, maybe in Utah.



Gabby: Sure, yeah.

Lindsay: (Mm-hm).

Gabby: Yeah. So, I think...

Tim: Well, I think, I think more than conservative and liberal. I think the prefix homo is just right now seen as controversial.

Gabby: Right.

Lindsay: (Mm).

Gabby: Hot topic.

Tim: (Um), (you know) there – the English language is such a robust language. It's the language of Shakespeare, and Dickens, and Mark Twain and so on and so forth. (Uh), this little contretemps is not really going to do anything to, or change anything, I don't believe. But it just shows up once again that the language itself is so vibrant, (uh), and, and these – what would you call it? These little land mines in the language exist. They, they, they, they always have.

Gabby: Right.

Tim: And so, right now, the prefix homo is (kind of) a, i-i-it's a land mine.

Gabby: Yes.

Tim: (Uh), you don't really want to use it if you don't have to. In the past, it's been, it's been used as an insult...

Gabby: (Uh-huh).

Lindsay: (Uh-huh).

Tim: ...(uh), and, and (you know), like, like, many other words and so -- (uh), at least in today's world, it's probably a word that is better left alone as, as much as possible. But who knows what's gonna (going to) happen in the future. We can't tell. It's just – too, me, personally, it's just fun to enjoy



using the English language, and enjoy teaching it to others. I'll just never get over the wonder each day of, (uh), of having a chance to explain English to other people.

Gabby: Oh, that's great.

Gabby: That's beautiful.

Lindsay: This is really useful for our listeners.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: I think it's good. This episode is really gonna (going to) challenge them and make them think on a different level about the language.

Tim: Oh, sure.

Gabby: About the language and also about our, our cultural and political scene here in the US.

Lindsay: (Mm-hm).

Gabby: So that's really, (you know), great examples you gave us and thank you for sharing your experience too. And if our listeners would like to find out more about your work and, (uh), and your blog, where can they go?

Tim: Well, (uh), they can do a couple of things.

Gabby: (Uh-hm).

Tim: If they can remember how to spell my last name, T-o-r-k-i-l-d, (uh), if they simply Google my name, (uh), Tim Torkildson, (uh), that will lead them to my blog because at least for another week or so, I guess, (you know), I'm kinda (kind of) famous.

Gabby: Yeah.

Tim: So, they can do that. The, the blog site itself is called, "I Write the Bloggs".

Gabby: Oh, interesting.



Tim: Just run it all together. Blogggs is spelled with three g's (bloggg).

Gabby: Okay.

Tim: But yeah, "I Write the Blogs". That's me. (Uh), right – frankly, right now, if, if you, if you Google the word 'homophone', you'll get my name.

Gabby: Yeah. You've had – you said about 25 different media interviews in the last couple of weeks, so...

Tim: Yeah.

Gabby: So, yeah. You'll [crosstalk]...

Tim: And I lost, I lost count of how many blog sites and, and websites have, have (uh), taken up the story, I, I know it's well over 100.

Gabby: Wow.

Lindsay: (Hm).

Gabby: Well, it's definitely a controversial topic, but learning English is the point here and we, we don't have to get controversial about learning English. It's (uh), it's a beautiful language as you said and it's beautiful to explore. So...

Lindsay: (Mm).

Gabby: Tim, I want to thank you so much for coming on All Ears English and thanks for your time. Thanks for sharing with us.

Lindsay: Yeah, thanks so much Tim.

Tim: Glad to do it, you two, and, (uh), again, you—I can't get over how perky you two sound.

Gabby: We just love what we do.

Tim: What kind of vitamins do you take?

Lindsay: Good question.

Gabby: We just love it. We love what we do.



Lindsay: Yeah, we're having fun.

Tim: Well, that's the secret to life. If you, if you love what you're doing, it's not even work.

Gabby: That's right.

Lindsay: There you go. Well, thanks again Tim, we'll talk soon.

Tim: All right. Thank you two.

Gabby: All right. Bye for now.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: If you wanna (want to) put your ears into English more often, be sure to subscribe to our podcast in iTunes on your computer or on your smartphone. Thanks so much for listening and see you next time.

