METHOD SHEET · ENGLISH

British and American methods

Phonics, communicative teaching, essay writing: what actually works

THE ESSENTIALS

English-speaking countries do not teach English the way France does. The United Kingdom builds on synthetic phonics (systematic sound decoding, assessed as early as Year 1), then on communicative language teaching and task-based learning. The United States emphasises expression: public speaking, debate and highly structured writing (the five-paragraph essay). A French-speaking learner progresses fast when the right tool is applied to the right problem: phonics for reading and accent, communicative teaching to unlock speaking, essay writing for written exams such as the baccalauréat, TOEFL or Cambridge.

- Phonics (UK): sound-to-spelling correspondences are taught systematically. Decisive for accent and reading aloud.
- Communicative teaching: you speak in order to do something; accuracy comes after the message. This is what unlocks inhibited students.
- Task-based learning: a real task (booking, persuading, presenting) structures the lesson.
- American essay writing: an explicit five-paragraph structure, remarkably effective under exam conditions.

The principles

Synthetic phonics (United Kingdom)
The 44 phonemes of English are taught explicitly with their possible spellings, then blended. The UK made this central to its primary schools and assesses decoding through a national check in Year 1. For a French speaker, it is the tool that permanently fixes pronunciation.

Communicative Language Teaching
Born in the 1970s and 1980s, this approach starts from meaning: language is used to communicate for real, and grammar is learnt in the service of use. It is the reference framework in teaching English as a foreign language.

Task-Based Learning
The lesson is built around a task to complete (making a call, arguing a case, presenting a project), followed by a focus on the language used. The student discovers their gaps through a real need, not a vocabulary list.

American reading and writing
US schools train public speaking, structured debate and formal writing very early: thesis, three evidenced arguments, conclusion. That framework adapts perfectly to French and international written exams.

Extensive reading and shadowing
Reading a lot at your own level (rather than a little at a very hard level) and repeating over a native recording: two low-cost English-speaking practices among the most productive for spoken fluency.

Example — UK or US: what actually differs

Both systems aim at the same language, but they do not assess the same skills — and that changes how you prepare.

1. Exams: Cambridge (B2 First, C1 Advanced) and IELTS assess accuracy and interaction in fine detail; the American TOEFL iBT mainly measures how fast you can process academic content.
2. Spelling and vocabulary: colour / color, organise / organize, autumn / fall, flat / apartment. Pick one standard and stick to it — that is what examiners expect.
3. Register: British writing rewards nuance and concession; American writing rewards a clear claim stated in the introduction.

4 Speaking: the British tradition trains interaction (questions, follow-ups); the American tradition trains sustained presentation and debate.

How it is used in lessons

A student who dares not speak
Strictly communicative work for three to five sessions: short exchanges on concrete topics, no correction on the spot, a language review at the end of the lesson. Confidence first, accuracy second.

Accent and reading aloud
Phonics targeted on the sounds absent from French (the "th", long and short vowels, word stress), minimal pairs, then shadowing on short extracts.

Written papers: baccalauréat, TOEIC, TOEFL
We install the five-paragraph structure and the linking words, then work against the clock. Most marks lost in writing come from a missing plan, not from vocabulary.

Adults and executives
Task-based learning on real situations from your job: meeting, e-mail, presentation, interview. We work on the English you need on Monday morning, not a school syllabus.

Who is it for?

- Secondary students stuck on speaking despite good written marks.
- Students whose French accent costs them marks in oral exams.
- Candidates for TOEIC, TOEFL or Cambridge certifications.
- Adults and employees who have to work in English.
- Expatriate families whose children move from one school system to another.

Its limits, honestly

- Purely communicative work without explicit grammar hits a ceiling on French exams, which mark accuracy.
- Phonics alone does nothing for an older student who already decodes well: then vocabulary and syntax are the work.
- The American five-paragraph structure is an excellent starting point, but it becomes formulaic if you never move beyond it.
- No method makes up for a lack of regular exposure: twenty minutes a day beats one heroic session a month.

Frequently asked questions

What is the difference between British and American methods for learning English?
The UK structures learning around synthetic phonics (systematic sound decoding), then communicative and task-based teaching. The US emphasises expression: public speaking, debate and tightly structured five-paragraph writing. The exams follow the same logic: Cambridge and IELTS assess accuracy and interaction, TOEFL iBT the ability to process academic content.

What is the phonics method?
Phonics means explicitly teaching the correspondences between English sounds and their spellings, then blending them to read and pronounce. The UK made it the basis of its reading instruction. For a French speaker it is the most effective tool for permanently fixing pronunciation and reading aloud without hesitation.

Should you choose British or American English?
Either is fine, but you must choose one and stay consistent: spelling, vocabulary and pronunciation should match, and that is what examiners assess. In France, textbooks and exams lean British; TOEFL and US programmes call for the American standard.

How do you unlock a student who dares not speak English?

Through openly communicative work: short exchanges on concrete topics, no correction on the spot, and a language review only at the end of the lesson. Progress is usually audible within three to five sessions; grammatical accuracy is then built on a foundation of confidence.
