TRANSCRIPT · EPISODE 231

Say or Tell? The Small Difference That Changes Your Sentence | Fix It in Five

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

94 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

A friend tells you something, and you want to repeat it.

You write: "She told that she was tired."

Something is not quite right.

What is it?

Welcome to Fix It in Five.

I'm Martin.

And I'm Julia.

In this episode, we fix one small difference that changes your sentence: say or tell?

These two verbs look similar, but they work differently in a sentence.

Say focuses on the words, and tell focuses on giving information to someone.

We have five steps: notice, fix, learn the rule, learn the fixed expressions, and practise.

Step one, notice.

In our opening sentence, tell has no person after it.

That is the piece we need to repair.

Step two, fix.

The problem is the verb tell.

After tell, we usually need a person.

So we have two good options.

Option one: "She said that she was tired."

Option two: "She told me that she was tired."

Notice the difference.

With said, there is no person after the verb.

With told, there is a person: told me, told him, told us.

Step three, the rule.

Tell plus a person plus the information.

"He told his sister that he was late."

And say plus the information, without a person.

"He said that he was late."

What if you want to mention the person with say?

Then you need the word to.

"He said to his sister that he was late."

It is correct, but it sounds a little more formal, so many people prefer told.

For reported information, tell usually answers the question "who?"

With say, the person is often omitted or introduced with to.

Here is one more useful pattern with tell: tell someone to do something.

For example, "The teacher told us to open the book."

With say, we use a different pattern.

For example, "The teacher said that we should open the book."

Let's see both verbs in one situation.

At the meeting, my boss said that we would finish early.

Afterwards, she told the team the new schedule.

You can also use both in questions.

"Can I tell you something?" asks someone to listen.

"Can I say something?" asks for a chance to speak.

Step four, fixed expressions.

Some expressions with tell do not need a person after the verb.

For example, tell the truth, tell a lie, tell a joke, tell a story, and tell the time.

"Please tell the truth."

"My grandfather tells great stories."

And with say, we use greetings and short words.

For example, say hello, say goodbye, say yes, say no, and say sorry.

"He said sorry and left."

So tell usually needs a person, or it belongs to a fixed expression.

Say is more general.

Step five, practice.

I will say a sentence with a gap.

You choose say or tell, in the correct form.

Then we explain the answer.

Number one: "He ... me that he was late."

The answer is told.

There is a person, me, right after the verb.

Number two: "Please ... the truth."

The answer is tell.

Tell the truth is a fixed expression.

Number three: "She ... goodbye and left."

The answer is said.

Say goodbye is a fixed expression with say.

Number four: "I ... to him that I was busy."

The answer is said.

We use to when we mention the person after say.

Number five: "Can you ... us a story?"

The answer is tell.

Tell us a story has a person, us, and a story.

Number six: "The teacher ... us to open the book."

The answer is told.

Tell plus a person plus to plus a verb.

Number seven: "He ... hello to everyone."

The answer is said.

Say hello is a fixed expression, and here we use to before the people.

Great work.

Let's return to our first sentence, with the fix.

"She said that she was tired."

"She told me that she was tired."

For this pattern, tell normally takes a person.

Fixed expressions such as tell a story work without one.

Both sentences are correct, and now you know when to use each one.

Now try making one sentence about someone you know.

You can use tell with a person or a fixed expression like tell a story.

Use say for the words themselves, for greetings, and when you add to before the person.

If you are not sure, ask yourself one question: is there a person right after the verb?

For more practice with say and tell, visit yourenglishtoolbox.com.

The link is in the description.

Thanks for listening.

See you next time.