

Strategies for Learning English as a Foreign Language

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Synopsis: This article is for students who wish to maximize their learning of English and go beyond classroom learning. Various study tips and strategies as well as advice on fully utilizing one's resources for learning English are outlined here.

Introduction

Why is English important?

English is an international language. Probably more than any other language in the world, English is used in *international relations, business, politics, education, tourism, science, and technology*. It is a language used globally for practically every major aspect of our lives.

There are at least several reasons why many people choose to study English: (1) *to prepare for English proficiency examinations for a job or school*, (2) *to obtain a career that may require a high level of English proficiency*, and (3) *to travel or study abroad*.

Many students consider going to school as being sufficient for learning a foreign language. They might say, "That's it. There is no more work to be done other than doing some homework and going to class once or twice a week. I'll just level up after the next test." Is learning a foreign language that easy and simple? The following tips and strategies for maximizing your learning of English might suggest to you that it is not.

Tips and strategies for learning English as a foreign language

- *Practice your speaking as often as possible:* this is the most important skill to develop when learning a foreign language. It is a practical language skill that is needed for jobs and business and for studying or traveling abroad. The problem is that foreign language books rarely give you enough opportunity for practicing your speaking: they are mostly for reading and writing. Therefore, to help improve your English speaking skills, participate in any and all conversations in English, whether it is just chitchatting, whether you're in the classroom, and whether you're with a teacher. Studying from a textbook may help you to speak in English, but it is not the most important thing. No matter how much you study from the textbooks and no matter how many words and expressions you have memorized, the textbooks are useless if you never practice and apply your English skills, especially in speaking. Memorization and studying from the textbooks are simply not enough when it comes to language learning: you have to *use* the language if you wish to become fluent at it.

- *Participate in any and all class activities*: this includes pair-work and group-work speaking activities as well as reviewing. The teacher may or may not use the textbook all the time. The teacher might use materials and exercises that supplement the lessons in the book; just because the teacher has decided not to open the textbook doesn't mean that the class will not study any English. *Remember, reviewing the old materials and practicing your English skills in different ways are essential when learning a foreign language.* Don't limit yourselves to book learning.
- *Review both present and old materials*: if you forget the main materials of the lessons, then how can you move on to the next level? Here's the problem: students often don't review and so many of them forget what they've been studying. There's much information to cover and the class can often go quickly. Therefore, it is easy to forget the information. That's why it is necessary to review before moving on to the next unit. If the class doesn't review and doesn't slow down at times, you may fall behind and get confused in class. As a consequence, you may be forced to move down to a lower level.
- *Listen to the directions at all times*: if you do not understand the directions, then how can you do your homework and how can participate in any of the class activities?
- *Know your grammar*: this is necessary to develop your writing skills and assist you in speaking.
- *Know your classroom English in order to fully understand what the teacher is saying and for you to be understood by the teacher.* Classroom English is English that is used in the classroom for giving directions and commands, and making statements, inquiries, and requests. Examples of classroom English are: "Get out your book," "Put away your book," "Sit down," "Be quiet," "Don't shout," "Listen to the directions," "Repeat after me," "Say the question," "Answer the question," "Did you do your homework?," "Do you understand?," "I don't understand," "I don't have a book," "May I borrow your pencil?," "May I go to the bathroom?," etc.
- *Do your homework assignments consistently and well*: do not rush through them. If you do not do your homework assignments and do not do them well, then how can you progress? How can the teacher check your writing, grammar, and reading skills if you don't do your homework?
- *Take notes*: you should frequently copy the teacher's notes from the board in your notebook, especially regarding sentence structures, grammar, new vocabulary, any important expressions, translations, etc. This way, you can review your notes at a later time and remember the information.
- *Practice your English outside the class to develop your English skills, especially in speaking, even if it isn't for homework.* If you never practice your English outside the class, then how can you develop fluency in speaking, reading, and writing? How can you gain confidence in these core language skills? Just spending 45 minutes a day with your English instructor is not enough. Find anyone who can speak in English, such as your friends, family, and foreigners, and try to converse with them in English if possible.
- *Be exposed to how English is used in different contexts and in different styles*: for example, watch foreign English films, watch the English news, listen to an English radio station, or read an English newspaper. These are also ways to gain insight into Western cultures.

- *Preview the lesson in the textbook before you come to class.* That way you are more prepared and less confused during class.
- *Look up any words you don't know in the dictionary.* It may be helpful to write down both the English definition and your native language translation.
- *Have at least two English notebooks with you:* one for diaries, and one for taking notes. Of course, if your teacher does not require you to write diaries, then having just one notebook may be enough.
- *Have good writing habits: write neatly and never forget to capitalize the first letter of every English sentence and put periods at the end.* Some teachers might give you an F grade for writing if you don't do these simple tasks.
- Find a friend or classmate and write an English dialogue together. Then present it to the class.
- Study with a friend or group. Often times, you may learn more from each other than just studying by yourselves.
- Find an English *pen pal* and write to each other in English.
- Make flashcards to memorize any important vocabulary and useful English expressions: e.g., one side may have English while the other side may have the translation or illustration.
- When memorizing the spelling of any new and difficult words, use this method: 1.) Copy the word. 2.) Cover the word. 3.) Memorize and write the word. 4.) Uncover and check the spelling. 5.) If the spelling is incorrect, then repeat steps 1-4 until you have fully memorized the spelling. Then move on to another difficult word and use the same process. (A similar method could also be used for memorizing key phrases and sentences).
- Listen to the CD and read the story out loud many times to improve your confidence in reading. Here's a method for practicing your listening and reading at home: 1.) Select a short reading passage such as one assigned by the instructor. Cover the text and listen to the passage while looking at the pictures only. 2.) Uncover the text and listen to the passage again but follow the words. 3.) Listen, pause, and repeat the passage line by line. 4.) Listen, pause, and repeat the passage paragraph by paragraph. 5.) Close the book and listen to the entire passage. Pay attention to the *pronunciation, intonation, and fluency* of the narrator's voice. 6.) Turn off the tape or CD. Open the book and read the entire passage out loud in your best speaking voice, trying to mimic the native speaker's voice in the recording; *then read it again but silently to yourself without moving your lips or pointing at the words.* (This method may work well with CDs; however, it may be more difficult to work with tapes because it takes a longer time to rewind and pause. Ask the instructor if you can get a copy of the CD).
- *Monitor and assess* your own speaking, for example, by *recording* your voice while reading out loud one of the passages from your textbook. Then compare it with the native speaker's voice in the original recording. Fix any errors in your pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. Repeat this process of recording and checking your voice as many times as needed. This may be a useful technique when you are practicing speaking alone. (As an option, you may present your recording to the class and have your peers and instructor to critique it).

- If you forget to bring any books, notebooks or pencils to class, then ask someone else if you can borrow them. Please do not just sit there and do nothing. Be responsible as a student! When you have completed an assignment in class, don't just wait for the teacher to come to you. Keep studying! For example, review the information in your book, practice writing by making new examples based on sentence structures that you've studied, memorize the spelling of key vocabulary words from the lesson, write an English dialogue based on an example from a book, do uncompleted pages in your book, correct your mistakes on old homework assignments, help a classmate, do peer review, etc. In addition, when finished with a speaking activity, don't just sit there and tell the teacher that you're finished. Keep practicing! For example, continue making more examples in your speaking, change partners and do role-play, initiate a new discussion in groups or pairs, *Q* and *A* (interview) your friend or partner, dictate or report what your friend spoke, play a guessing game that involves *Q* and *A*, talk about your weekend/family/sports/hobbies/weather/food/entertainment/holidays, etc. *Remember, with more practice at this language, the better at English you will be.*