**Advice for English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners on How to**

**Improve Their English**

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As an ESL student, are you frustrated with your lack of progress in learning the English language? Do you yearn to become more fluent but find it continually difficult? If so, then I have some simple tips that should hasten the process of acquiring the English language. English can be extremely difficult because it has so many exceptions and inconsistencies, but with patience and hard work, you can become proficient. Moreover, you may even achieve speaking and writing skills close to those of a native speaker.

1. ***Spend time with native speakers.*** Make sure that your brain is exposed to English as often as you can. If possible, the best living arrangement is staying with an English-speaking family because then you will hear English used in many daily situations. If you cannot live with an English-speaking family, the next best step is to find a “conversation partner.” What exactly is a conversation partner? This is a native English speaker with whom you meet on a weekly basis to chat in English. You can discuss any topic you like with this person as you practice your spoken English; a primary topic is often exchanging information about your culture versus American culture. Ideally, this person may become a trustworthy friend. Often, if you are a high school or college student, you can locate this person by joining a club or contacting the staff advisor for the International Students’ Association (ISA) on your college campus. Frequently, native English speakers who are studying to become future ESL teachers want to participate as conversation partners with foreign students, not only because they earn credit for their coursework but also because they have a genuine interest in students from other countries.

2. ***Read English books that are fun and interesting to you***. Obviously, you already do a lot of reading for your academic life, but do you find time to read in English just for pleasure? If you select any type of reading that appeals to your interests and is at the right reading level for you, then you will be improving your English as you learn about a subject that excites you. For example, perhaps you are interested in an American actor/actress; find a biography on this individual, making sure that the degree of difficulty of the writing is not too high for you. The general rule regarding reading level is: If there are **more than 5 unfamiliar words** per page of text, then the book is probably too challenging for you. Don’t be too embarrassed to use books that are written for a younger audience if these books are more at your current reading level. You can start at the bottom and gradually work your way up. Especially if you are on vacation from school, you should use some of your free time for relaxed and enjoyable reading!

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3. ***Carry around a small notepad and pencil wherever you go***. Every time you hear a native speaker say a word or phrase that is unfamiliar to you or just interesting sounding to your ear, request that the person pause for a few seconds to slowly repeat and define what was just said while you jot it down. In this way, you can create your own little English dictionary to study from whenever you have time. Most, if not all, native speakers will be very happy to help you in this way as they see how motivated you are to learn! I witnessed this strategy firsthand when I was a college student and had a friend, Mauro, who was visiting Bakersfield from Italy for a year. Mauro was fascinated with language and very devoted to learning English as perfectly as possible. In the beginning, he made a lot of mistakes, as you might expect, but he never stopped trying. One of his most powerful tools for learning was a little notebook, similar to the one just described, in which he wrote many new vocabulary words and idiomatic phrases, such as “it’s raining cats and dogs” or “to burn the midnight oil.” He was never afraid to ask questions, which helped him learn English very rapidly.

4. ***Last but not least, have an optimistic attitude about learning English***. How you feel psychologically about learning English will have a strong influence on how well you learn it. In other words, if you feel miserable about trying to acquire English and frequently tell yourself, “I can’t do this,” then you will probably have a difficult time. On the other hand, if you maintain a positive mindset and often encourage yourself with words such as “I can accomplish this,” you will discover that the learning process is not so painful. Also, do not expect perfection from yourself!! Learning any new language is challenging, and you should anticipate that you ***will*** make mistakes. It is a normal part of the experience. As a matter of fact, you can’t learn without making errors. Force yourself to participate in English conversations, and don’t allow your shyness to control your behavior. I have noticed that many ESL students who are living here in the States spend way too much time with other foreign students speaking the same language rather than surrounding themselves by and interacting with English speakers. Don’t let this situation happen to you! Be bold! Be brave! Seize the moment! We have a common saying in English, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

The above suggestions are the 4 most important ones I know for helping an ESL student pick up English. I have observed their effectiveness firsthand, especially when I was an exchange student myself living in Japan for one year. Though I was learning Japanese instead of English, the same pieces of advice apply to any language. Just experiment with these ideas, give them time to work, and you will see how useful they can be. Best wishes!