

第 4 章

On Learning English (Tim Kawanishi-Young)

Introduction

This situation may be familiar to many of you: you want to be good at English, but struggle to study and fail to see improvement. It can be difficult to even decide what to study, and it is difficult to keep motivation. Sometimes you might even feel like there is no hope of actually using English and no point in trying. If you feel this way, you can be sure that you are not alone. Many people around the world have this experience when studying any foreign language, even those less complicated and difficult than English. In this essay, I present my own thoughts on what is needed to study English (or any foreign language) effectively. Put simply, I think that you need a combination of three elements: (1) motive—a clear reason to study and a focus on *learning* rather than *knowing*; (2) target—a concrete, easily defined goal that you want to achieve; and (3) opportunity—the time, resources, and ability not just to study, but to put language into practice. You can certainly make some progress with just one or two of these three, but consistent, sustained improvement is much more likely when you have all three together.

A quick disclaimer

Before I continue, I feel it is important to make it clear where this advice is coming from. I am a native English speaker born and raised in the United States of America, so I have never had to struggle to learn English. I am not a specialist in linguistics, nor have I been intensively trained in the teaching of English as a foreign language. This essay will not tell you which English study book is the best or what the most effective way to memorize vocabulary and grammar structures is.

On the other hand, however, I am also a lifelong language learner. I began studying Japanese at age 18 when I started university studies, which means that I have spent over half of my life involved with Japanese language in one way or another. Today, my academic specialty is Japanese literature of the Meiji period. But even though I read and write in Japanese in my academic research, and although I teach, live, and work in Japan, if you take one of my classes, you will quickly see that my Japanese is by no means perfect. (Even now, there are still some days when it feels like my ability to communicate in Japanese is not even particularly good!) In other words, even though I am not a specialized English teacher, I am familiar with the pains and the never-ending struggle of learning a second language, and that is the place

from which I am making my advice.

With that out of the way, let's take a closer look at the three elements that I introduced earlier: motive, target, and opportunity.

1. Motive

Having a motive to learn English may seem like the most obvious item of these three. There are all kinds of reasons that knowing English is useful, many of which you have probably heard already: it is one of the most common languages of international communication, whether in business, tourism, or on the internet. American films and TV shows (as well as those from other English speaking countries) are marketed and available worldwide, and so on. However, if you carefully read the beginning of this paragraph again, the reason that I stress this point so much may become clear—there is a difference between committing to *learn* English and just wanting to *know* English.

What exactly is the difference? Well, on the one hand, practically everyone in the world wants to *know* a foreign language—it is natural to want to be able to express yourself clearly, to understand jokes, to listen and speak and read and write freely. Examples of imaginary tools that make communication or translation instant and transparent are everywhere. As just a couple of examples, Doraemon has his honiyaku konnyaku, while Arthur Dent from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* has his Babel fish. (In fact, we might even think about the contemporary growth of machine translation tools as another expression of the same fantasy of *already knowing* all of the languages in the world.)

On the other hand, a commitment to *learn* English is a commitment to struggling constantly: to mastering vocabulary, grammar, and common phrases, both fundamental and specialized. Even once those elements grow familiar, understanding the way that English is used—how people communicate their ideas, what kind of jokes they tell, what people do and do not value—is a process that will never be done. Staying in contact with a language and a culture takes constant effort and practice.

In other words, to effectively learn another language, your basic attitude must shift away from the natural focus on *knowing* the language completely and totally. You can't let yourself believe that you will ever be done. Instead, you must be able to appreciate—and commit to—the extended process of *learning* the language, understanding that there will always be something that you don't know yet.

2. Target and 3. Opportunity

It may seem strange for me to talk about targets and goals next, since I just wrote so many words to stress that focusing on completion and being done is something that should be avoided. However, having concrete, easily defined goals is necessary to balance out the never-ending process of learning. At the same time, I believe that while your motive can be large and abstract—committing to long-term learning and overall improvement—your targets and goals should be as specific as possible. Obviously, a goal like “I want to be able to read English more quickly and easily” is very vague and difficult to tackle. Something like “I want to be able to read the newspaper” or “I want to read literature” is better, but even better still would be a goal like “I want to be able to understand most of what I read in *The New York Times*” or “I want to read ‘The Enormous Radio’ by John Cheever.” In the same way, “I want to be able to talk to people in English” is much less useful of a goal than “I want to be able to explain the menu to

tourists who come to the restaurant where I work part-time.”

That last example also shows how target and opportunity can be connected—when you want to improve your English, the best thing that you can do is to use it as much as you can. A very common tendency among language learners is to study too much: to try to master the fundamentals (grammar, vocabulary, common phrases, and so on) as a first step before you advance any further. I will admit that fundamentals are certainly important; without them it is very difficult to accomplish much. So what does it mean to “study too much”?

For one, understanding (and correctly using) the fundamentals of language is not a binary. Just like language learning as a whole, there is never a clear point where you have definitively mastered the basics of English. You will always have good days and bad days in a foreign language. If you understand that you will always be learning, then you can realize that there will always be time to study or review fundamentals.

At the same time, one of the constants of human existence is that we get better at the things that we do regularly. My youngest son is just about to turn one, and he is just learning to walk. Watching him totter around on shaky legs is a fine reminder that no one is born walking. It’s something that we practice every day of our lives until eventually we don’t even think about it anymore. The same thing is true of swimming, of eating with a spoon, of putting on makeup... and of course of language too. For the purposes of motivation and directed language learning, it is probably *more* important to practice using English than it is to master the fundamentals.

Developing opportunities to use English is all about finding opportunities to practice reaching your goal. For reading and listening goals, libraries and the internet make it easier than ever to access all kinds of material in English, from newspapers and novels to TV shows and movies to podcasts, Tiktok videos, and livestreams. Whatever you are interested in, it is possible to find people writing, speaking, and conversing about it in English on the internet. If you are more interested in conversation, then obviously opportunity requires finding willing conversation partners, but luckily, you go to school in Kyoto, one of the tourist capitals of Japan. There is no lack of volunteer opportunities and part-time jobs in this area that will regularly put you in contact with tourists whose only available language is English.

In conclusion

I fear that I may have emphasized the challenge and daunting scale of learning a foreign language too much. It certainly is a lot of work, and it certainly does require commitment, but I believe that learning a foreign language and using it to communicate with people is not only fun, but also has outstanding benefits. Like many of the things that we do in college, learning a foreign language is really another way of gaining perspective on yourself and your own life. When we learn to express ourselves in a foreign language, we also learn a different way of thinking and seeing the world and our place in it. While automated machine translation is obviously improving by leaps and bounds in recent years, I strongly urge you not to rely on the computer for doing your thinking for you. Studying a foreign language can give you access to people and places that are impossible to predict.