

5 Ways to Improve My English by Estrella Chan

Dear English Learner:

Many people believe that you have to learn English by taking a course designed by someone, perhaps by attending a class or listening to a CD course. These are good options, if the methods fit your personality. I believe there are many ways to improve a foreign language on your own.

Here are some methods I showed my students and clients. Try them out and see which one fits your learning style. If you have questions while experimenting with them, feel free to email me at support@englisharoundtheworld.com

Happy learning!
Estrella Chan

How do I sound like a native English speaker?

Sir Sidney Poitier, known for his role in the movie *To Sir with Love* and many other movies, faced a similar issue early in his acting career. He wanted to be rid of his Bahamian accent in order to succeed in his acting career (it was a time when diverse accents were less well received.) To do this, he bought a radio, chose a program he liked, and imitated the accent of the host. He did this for 6 months, then audition for a part. That's how he got started in the movie industry.

What can we learn from Sidney Poitier? He chose someone

who has clear pronunciation. The host was on radio. He had to speak clearly! So choosing someone with the kind of clear pronunciation and accent you want to imitate is a start.

Then Sidney imitated the host. Inflection, enunciation, everything. He kept at this until the new speaking style became a part of him.

One of the elements in this kind of imitation is music—music of a language. You have listened to people speaking English with a British, Australian, Hawaiian, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish accent, right? Why is it easier to understand some and not others?

Language is like music. Some languages are spoken with more staccato. Some sound more melodic. Some put the inflection at the end of a sentence instead of the middle.

So when you start imitating someone whose accent and pronunciation you like, observe the length of the syllables, where is the inflection placed, when does the voice go up, and when does it come down. Where is the highest note? The lowest note of the sentence? When you begin, just listen. When you have become accustomed to the music of this person, then start imitating.

If you are imitating news reporters on television or on u-tube, you have the added benefits of watching how their facial muscles move, the shape of their mouth when they pronounce certain words. You can use a mirror to imitate those movement.

Once you have mastered the imitation, you can find another person to imitate so you expose yourself to different styles. When you feel ready, you will come up with your own style that is both clear and that feels right to you.

Have fun with this. Just play with sounds.

Listen to audio books.

Some popular books are recorded onto CDs. This is an excellent way to read the story while hearing it. You can hear the inflection of the sentence, pronunciation of the consonants and vowels. And you'll be learning from a professional because only those who speak clearly are asked to record the book onto a CD.

If imitating a radio host or a TV host feels too fast because you don't know what they are going to say, this is an excellent alternative.

How do I improve my pronunciation?

- If you are imitating journalists on TV, watch their facial muscles. How do they shape their mouth at the beginning of a word?
- Can you hear the ending consonant? (for example, the "d" in "word")
- English vowels (especially "a") have different pronunciations. Listen to the different ways that "a" can be pronounced.
- Politicians tend to speak clearly. They need to be good

public speakers. So learn from their pronunciation in addition to journalists.

- After you learn how to pronounce a word, also listen to how it is pronounced when used in a sentence. Sometimes that changes slightly. For example, when you say the word "adjust" by itself, you pronounce the ending "t" sound. However, in the middle of a sentence such as "I have to adjust to life in my new home," you pronounce only the "t" in "to" because "adjust" ends in a "t" and "to" begins with a "t". It would sound awkward if you pronounce both "t".
- To sound more like a native English speaker, learn pronunciation in context rather than repeating a word by itself. Inflection changes depending on whether the word is in the middle of a sentence or at the end.

How do I learn word order?

Different languages arrange the order of words differently. For example, in Spanish, the sentence "I don't have any books" would have the order "No have none books". But when you are learning a foreign language, how would you know the word order of that language?

- After you read a paragraph, go back and observe the order of words. Develop the habit of looking for patterns. Are there any general patterns? As you do this more and more, you will gradually increase your familiarity with word order.
- Go back to the paragraph. Substitute the nouns with

different nouns, and the verbs with different verbs. Try using sentences that you actually use in your daily life. Now you are making the word order a natural part of your speaking.

- Then substitute the adjectives and adverbs.
- If you like grammar books, find ones that have natural sounding sentences. Show the book to a native speaker and ask if the sentences sound natural. If so, imitate the sentences, changing the noun and the verb so the sentence becomes your own.
- Allow yourself time to observe, absorb, and try out the patterns. You will become more familiar with the patterns each time you use them. Please do not worry about being perfect. Learning is a process. Please do not require yourself to be perfect the first time. Pressure is stressful. Stress is counter-effective for learning.

Increase your reading speed

If you are an international student, this will be an important skill to learn. You can cut your reading time in half, probably more.

Time your reading for 2 minutes. Read the way you usually do.

- * Count the number of lines you read
- * Pick any 3 lines and count the number of words per line
(Find the average number of words per line)
- * Multiply the average number of words per line by the number of lines you read
- * Divide by 2 (you read for 2 minutes)

* This is how fast you are reading per minute

Here is an example:

- 1) You just read for 2 minutes.
- 2) You read 50 lines.
- 3) You pick any 3 lines to count how many words are in each.
 - a) 1 line has 9 words
 - b) 1 line has 10 words
 - c) 1 line has 11 words
 - d) The average number of words per line is 10
- 4) You multiply 10 words by the 50 lines you read. That's 500 words.
- 5) You read for 2 minutes, so you divide 500 words by 2
- 6) Your current reading speed is 250 words per minute.

If you are disappointed at the speed, don't worry. It won't stay this way for long.

Here's the first technique. Let me explain the logic behind this technique. When you get on the freeway, you increase your speed from the street to match that of the freeway. Let's say no one is on the highway and you speed up from 55 to 60, 65, 70 miles per hour. Suddenly you see a police car miles ahead. You slow down—65, 60, 55. Now 55 mph feels slow to you, right? But it really isn't that slow. 55 mph is fast.

That's the way with this first technique. It is training the movement of your eyes. You are not trying to read for understanding. Like the highway speed, you are moving your eyes at a faster and faster speed (like 70 mph), then when you

slow down, you will feel you are reading very slow. But just like 55 mph really isn't that slow, your eye movement isn't that slow either.

So, let's begin. And remember, you are not reading the words, just training your eyes to move fast.

Underline each line with your finger. When you reach the end of the line, instead of lifting your finger, wrap it around so you find the first word on the next line.

Research shows that we spend 1 out of 6 seconds looking for the beginning of the next line.

Continue underlining each line with your finger so your eyes are accustomed to moving fast and landing on the first word of the next line.

Increase your speed.

Now start slowing down. You can even begin to see some of the words now, right?

Okay. Choose a page you have not read before. Time your reading for 2 minutes again. This time, use this technique. Then compare your reading speed.

Practice 1 skill a week

That was a lot of information. Too many skills to practice. So pick only one and practice it for one week. In week two, pick

another skill. Rotate.

Have fun with your learning! Join Toastmasters International. Google local groups called “meet up”. Americans who want to practice a foreign language meet native speakers of that foreign language at different locations regularly. If this club doesn’t already exist in your area, you can start one by going to Meetup.com.

If you have questions while practicing these skills, just send me an email at support@englisharoundtheworld.com

To your learning success!

Estrella