



The world is becoming one big global village and English is its official language. Being a native English speaker is thus a really big advantage, but only a small percentage (approximately 5.5 %) of the world's population are native English speakers.

The rest of us have to work hard and try to develop English skills that are as close as possible to the ones of native speakers; even more so if you don't speak any of the other big languages (100 mio +) like Mandarin, Arabic, Spanish, Hindi and so on.

Let's look now at some semi-efficient and very efficient ways of really improving your English as well as at some additional general advice, no matter if you want to improve your reading, writing, speaking or listening skills.

NOT THE BEST WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR ENGLISH SKILLS

The first thing that usually comes to people's minds when they're thinking about improving their English skills is going to a traditional English course. You meet once or twice a week and take a specific lecture, have a little bit of conversation and take a few tests. Maybe your company is even prepared to pay for that kind of a business English course. Unfortunately, that kind of an approach only works well in a few cases.

The first case is if you know nothing about English and you're really starting from scratch. Then it makes sense to go to a beginner course and start working on the basics and foundations. The good thing is that you can ask your tutor questions and make progress in your knowledge step by step. But as soon as you learn the basics, your learning speed goes down fast (if you can read this article that's definitely the case), unless...

You take it really seriously and that is the second case when a language course is useful, even if you are not a beginner. You take the course with a long-term view in mind, to keep doing it for a few years. In addition to that, you do all the exercises at home, you make some extra effort outside the classroom and so on. It's the easiest to do while you are a student, but if you want it strong enough, it can be done even later in life. In the long term, you probably improve your English the most, but it takes a lot of time, energy, money and effort.

Besides off-line courses, online options come up. They're a very good and affective way to learn, but only under one condition. If you're really disciplined. It works only if you're able to schedule a few hours a couple of times per week just to learn English and forget everything else. With the expansion of MOOCs (massive online open courses) you have a lot of options to learn English or any other skill online, but...

Many studies have shown that people do buy online courses, subscribe, feel good about themselves, but only a small percentage of people actually commit to

regular online learning and finish a course. Because it's hard. You have so many things to do, so many distractions, you're tired after a working day and so on. You can subscribe to a dozen free and paid courses, but if you don't schedule regular time to practice, everything is just a big waste.

Let's move on. What you also probably do is travel. While you are abroad, you are forced to use your English if there is no other bridge language. That is good, except for a few problems. You only travel from time to time, so you don't use English regularly. If you don't travel to English-speaking countries, you will probably speak with other people who are also on the beginner or intermediate level.

Traveling is a good way to conquer your fear (we will talk about that in a moment) and it's also good motivation to really learn a language since you can feel hindered due to not being able to speak fluently, but your progress won't be really fast unless you travel very often and avoid interaction with other people.

If you don't travel a lot and don't have the time, energy and discipline to do it in a long-term scheduled way, there's a nice alternative you can take. It's about implementing as many situations as possible into your daily life that will help you improve your English skills.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH ENGLISH

There are many things you're already doing on a daily basis and you don't need any additional discipline, even if you switch to the English language while doing them. It may slow you down a little bit at the beginning and take more effort, but you won't have to do any big changes to your schedule, time sacrifices and so on. What do I have in mind?

You probably use the computer on a daily basis. Switch everything to English. Choose English as your default language for the operating system, office programs, all applications you use etc. Do the same with your mobile phone and any other device. It's not a revolutionary idea, but it will help you be in daily touch with English and you will be forced to improve your knowledge when you

won't understand something or will search for some function you know your computer has but you can't find.

What you also probably do on a weekly basis is watch some movies or TV shows. If you are a total beginner, watch them in your language with English subtitles. It may be hard to find content you like, but there must be something, if you look hard enough. If you are on the intermediate level, watch as many things as possible in the English language with English subtitles.

Subtitles will help you understand everything, especially in TV shows where they use more complex language or speak more quietly. When you master that, start watching everything in English without subtitles. You can do the same when listening to music. Don't just listen to the melody, try to understand the lyrics.

The next thing you probably do every day is drive a car or take public transport. Instead of listening to music or playing games, you can listen to audiobooks in English or listen to some English skills podcasts. You can now find most books in an audio format. If you don't like books, you probably do read daily news or articles. You can find apps like Blinkist, where you can listen to current news and popular online articles. What's really good is that you can look at the text while you listen to audio.

When you're sitting in front of the computer, you also definitely read some news and search for different things. Subscribe to at least one English newspaper or magazine or news site about one topic of your interest. Don't just scan it, really read it. Slowly. If you don't understand something, look it up in the dictionary or google it. As a matter of fact, you should google everything in English. Thus you will slowly start using English more and more.

There is one very cute thing you can do if you are somewhere at the beginning. Somehow you have to slowly force your brain to think in English as well. You know that in an AgileLean Lifestyle, we like to visualize everything. What you can do is take post-it notes, write an English word on each one and stick them to all the things around your home.

Even if you already know the words, it will remind your brain that there is one

more language you want to master. I know it's a little bit silly, but as I've said many times: if you want extraordinary results, you have to take an extraordinary approach.

DEAL WITH YOUR FEAR AND MISTAKES

You do most of the things mentioned above completely alone in a very controlled environment. There is no real interaction. People won't even bother you with questions like why are you reading a book in English etc. But if you really want to improve your English skills, you have to go a step further from your comfort zone. You have to deal with your fear of looking stupid and your fear of making mistakes.

Every master was once a disaster. There is nothing you can do about that. If you want to progress faster, you need the self-confidence to engage with people and make mistakes. 99 % of the people, for example native speakers, won't even make a big deal out of your mistakes. They will help you and make you feel as comfortable as possible.

There are a few people who may find it funny when you make a mistake, for example your best friends, but you shouldn't be bothered by that. It's only because they're jealous of your awesome character. ;)

What you will find out and may frustrate you is that you will be doing the same mistakes over and over again. It takes some time to make new brain synapses, but once you do it, they're there for almost forever. Thus you have to be patient and persistent. Anyway, an important step on the way of improving your English is getting over fear and starting to engage with people and some serious reading material.

The only way to really improve your English skills

GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT IMPROVING YOUR ENGLISH SKILLS

You've conquered your fears. You want to make real progress regarding your English skills. Here is what you should do.

Read as much as possible in English every day. Don't read a single sentence in your mother tongue, except for some e-mails if you have to. Forget about local news, local TV stations, local magazines etc. They're only in your way of becoming better at English and a big waste of time anyway. Start reading everything in English.

Equip yourself with all the modern gadgets, especially a good smartphone (I'd recommend an iPhone). Subscribe to blogs, newsletters, buy books only in the English language, on Amazon for example, and read them with your Kindle app.

Take advantage of every moment you have to read something in English. Mix light reading material, like blogs, with some heavier English literature, like Dickens or Hemingway or Joyce or scientific articles written by native speakers. If you want to improve your English, you have to read some literature that's one level higher from your skills.

In addition to reading everything in English, the best way to improve your English skills, especially writing skills, is to write. Start writing in English as much as possible. Start your own blog in English or, if you don't want to publish anything yet, start writing your own private journal. Change the language of your posts on social media.

Make some friends from abroad and write them as many e-mail messages in English as possible. Try to become friends with people who are better at English than you are and IM with them regularly. Join online forums and do some writing there.

One of the reasons why I've started this blog is to improve my English skills. I get all of my articles proofread, so I see clearly the mistakes I'm making. I get

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frustrated because I make a lot of the same mistakes, but they are disappearing one by one as time passes. Get your texts proofread if you have the resources.

If you want to improve your overall English skills, you have to read in English as much as possible. If you want to improve your writing skills, you have to start writing. And if you want to improve your speaking skills, you have to speak English as much as possible.

The best way to do the latter is to make as many foreign friends as possible. You should make new international friends and speak with them in English as much as possible.

One thing that I've noticed is that if I spend time talking with people who are better at English than I am, my skills go up. If I talk to people who speak worse than I do, I subconsciously level down my language as well. That doesn't mean you shouldn't spend time with people who speak worse than you. It's your job to help them, much like others are helping you.

A general rule in life is that you should spend one third of your time with people who are better than you, one third of your time with people who are on the same level as you and one third of the time with people who are not as good as you.

You can take speaking practice even a step further. What you can do is to make an agreement with some of your best friends to speak and IM only in English, although you could communicate in your native language much more easily. It may be weird at the beginning, but who likes normal and easy anyway.

You can add some grammar books, mobile or web applications and language courses on top of that. But if you aren't reading, writing and speaking in English on a daily basis, all other effort is more or less a big waste of your time. You should try to write, read and speak in English as much as possible every day and on top of that have some fun with mobile applications that help you with your grammar, idioms, pronunciations, phrases etc.

You should develop the following mindset: Every sentence you write, every text you read, and every word that comes from your mouth in your native language (with all due respect toward it) is a lost opportunity to improve your English.

It's not that I have something against native language (like it may sound), but you probably already speak it quite well. Besides that, the world is becoming completely flat with English and Mandarin as the two dominating languages. The better you are at one of them or even at both, the more opportunities you will have in life.

And don't forget: writing in a new language is pretty similar to fitness. It's hard and mentally exhausting at first. It's even harder if you aren't very talented for languages and you've always been more of a numbers guy, for example.

You just have to build up your own capacities to the point at which you think, write or speak in English as effortlessly as you do in your mother tongue. To do that, try to think about things in English before you think about them in your native tongue. It will get you thinking faster. And try to speak English in your mind as much as possible.

GETTING TO THE MASTERY LEVEL

Reading, speaking and writing in English will definitely get you very far, but probably not to the mastery level. The best way to get to the mastery level is, as mentioned at the beginning, to take long-term professional courses and thus build your knowledge step by step over the years.

It's even better if you can study English in college, but that's not the best possible option for many people. Nevertheless, there are still some alternatives. It all just takes a lot of time and effort.

Buy yourself a book of grammar, vocabulary, idioms or any other part of the English language and start studying. Do it by yourself, professionally, as you would if you were going to courses or classes. You also have many online courses, but traditional books can do magic as well.

If you don't have the discipline to do that regularly, on a weekly basis, take a whole week off and instead of going to holidays, dedicate your time to improving English. You can also go to summer camps or other intensive courses. If you decide for that, what's really important is that you implement the new things you've learned into everyday use, otherwise you will forget them in the blink of an eye.

There are three more things that will help you get to the mastery level. The first one is reading out loud. You may feel stupid while doing it, but it's still a very effective way to progress. Before you start asking yourself how stupid you are for reading out loud, remember that Demosthenes, a Greek orator, used to speak with rocks in his mouth to improve his stuttering.

The second thing you can do is to have a professional debate. In a professional debate, you have to shape your thoughts, you have to find the right sentences, you're under stress and so on. Having a passionate debate with a native English speaker can be a real challenge that will level up your game.

Having really good English speakers for friends, people who won debating contests, will also help you a lot. Surround yourself with people who will empower you and help you improve.

You need to know around 500 words and a few grammar rules to do basic communication in English. These 500 words are also the words that are most commonly used in everyday life. But if you really want to become a master, you have to go out of this everyday circle. Here are some ideas how.

Learn as many words as possible from one category that's not in everyday use, like colors. Learn technical words from a certain field. Learn slang language with Urban dictionary. Regularly read literature and complex texts from different fields of interest.

What you'll also find out is that you pretty much use the same words over and over again. Try to constantly learn new words. One way to do it is to use Thesaurus. When you feel like you're using the same word too frequently, look for synonyms. Soon, you will start using more and more new words.

The last advice I have concerns improving your speaking skills. Record yourself and listen to your pronunciation. Hearing yourself speak will help you correct your accent. Listen how native speakers pronounce words.

Last but not least, the one and only, by far the best way to really learn English, including improving your pronunciation, is to move to the English-speaking country you like the most for a few years. That's also one thing you should consider and that may help you advance fast in life. It's not easy, but it's definitely worth your while.

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

The only way to really improve your English skills

If you have enough discipline, time and a fresh mind, you can do everything online, on your computer, tablet and mobile phone. Reading, speaking, listening etc. But only if you really want it badly enough. Since I know that you do, below is a list of the best online resources that can help you get to the mastery level in your English, step by step.

But don't burden yourself with too many resources. Take an hour or two, check and try a few different resources, pick the ones you like best and then stick to them. You cannot consume the whole internet and if you take too much on your shoulders, you will never really start learning.

General online English resources

- British Council
- Oxford Dictionaries
- Rosetta Stone
- Dr Grammar (University of Northern Iowa)
- BBC Learn English
- ESL Gold
- OneStopEnglish
- UsingEnglish
- OpenLanguage
- Voxy
- EnglishTown
- EnglishBlog
- EnglishClub
- EnglishForums
- RealEnglish
- Lyrics training (learn English from music)
- Newsmart (learn English from news)

Tools

- Common Errors in English Usage (there's also a book)

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- OneLook (Dictionary Search)
- OneLook Reverse Dictionary
- Visual Dictionary (Merriam Webster)
- IdiomSite
- Fonetiks
- Lang-8 (a community where natives correct what you write)
- LingQ

Tutors and speaking

- MyEnglishTeacher
- Fluentify
- EnglishTutorsLife
- Verbling
- HowDoYouDo
- ELE

You can also join many Facebook groups, meet some new friends and practice your English.

Mobile and tablet apps

- British Council Apps
- Cambridge Apps
- Rosetta Stone
- Busuu
- Duolingo
- Babbel
- MosaLingua
- Conversation English
- SpeakingPal
- Speak English
- The Grammar

You can find tons of other apps in your application store. You just have to invest some energy into finding the one that suits you best.

Podcasts

- Grammar Girl
- ESLPod
- Business English Pod
- British Council
- BBC The English We Speak
- Better@English

YouTube and other videos

- BritishCouncil
- BBC Learning English
- AngloLink
- Two Minute English
- EnglishCentral
- Jeniffer ESL
- Rachel's English
- Let's Talk
- PrivateEnglishPortal
- EnglishClass 101
- RealEnglish
- MrDuncan

Kindle books

- Common Errors in English Usage
- The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation

MOOC

- Udemy – Learn English
- edX – English

- FutureLearn
- The Virtual Linguistics Campus

At the end, remember that it makes sense to make the process of improving your English skills more like a game than a chore. Your brains function much better if things are fun. You have to take it seriously, you have to be committed, but it should feel more like an exciting challenge and an enjoyable activity than struggle and hard work.