

CHAPTER 2

IMPROVING ENGLISH

Among Chinese students already in the United States who were surveyed for the development of this web site, the piece of advice most often suggested for new students was *improve your English*. See the box in Sec. 1.2. Our discussion of English improvement comes under the headings below. *Even if you earned high scores on the TOEFL, do not assume that you have the English skills to easily converse with Americans*. Many Chinese students in the United States are surprised by how much difficulty Americans have in understanding them.

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2.1. Why is English So Important?

Do you want to:

- earn good grades while you are in the United States?
- be able to speak comfortably with your teachers, fellow students, and neighbors?
- have a good relationship with your academic adviser?
- obtain a graduate teaching assistantship or other form of financial aid?
- be able to carry out normal administrative procedures without stress?
- be able shop, talk on a telephone, and use the public transportation system without difficulty?
- get an internship in your field of study?
- make presentations at professional meetings?
- make a positive impression on prospective employers?
- make friends with people who are not Chinese?

All of these worthy goals require using English. *Everything will be easier for you, and you will be able to accomplish more of what you want to accomplish, if you speak English well*. Much of your success in the U.S. will depend on your ability to communicate with people in English. There will be times when you need to know how to use a machine, obtain information on getting a job, or convince another person of your ideas. To accomplish these goals you will need English. Students constantly share ideas and information in informal conversations. If you miss out on these conversations, your chances for professional and personal success will be limited compared to your peers.

2.2. Expect On-site English Tests

No matter what TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score you have achieved, you may be required to sit for one or more English-language proficiency tests at your school. U.S. schools have learned that even a high TOEFL score may not reflect the ability to write or converse well in English.

The printed information you receive from your school probably tells you whether you face any English-as-a-second-language (ESL) tests.

Schools may require a *general English-proficiency test* for many if not all new foreign students who are not native speakers of English. These tests are intended to supplement the information TOEFL gives about your English proficiency. The tests normally include an oral interview and a written essay.

Universities, at least public universities, will require prospective foreign teaching assistants to take one or two additional spoken English tests to determine whether they are able to carry out teaching responsibilities. These tests may require you to give a presentation on some topic, perhaps to an audience of students.

2.3 Obstacles to Improving English

Several factors seem to impede Chinese students from improving their English while they are studying in the United States:

- Not realizing the importance of good English
- Presence of many other Chinese Students
- Shyness and fear
- Americans' reluctance to point out errors
- Age
- Finding out that learning English is about more than learning a language

Each of these is discussed briefly here.

- ♦ Not Realizing the Importance of Good English.

Some new students focus entirely on their academic studies, believing that working hard on their studies will compensate for their English-language problems.

Later, when they have to write research papers or a thesis or dissertation, or take an oral examination, or give an oral defense of a thesis or dissertation, they realize that they should have worked on their English from the beginning. In addition, when they try to find a job on campus or after graduation, they find that they are at a major disadvantage.

- ◆ Being in a Hurry to Finish

Many new Chinese students are so intent on earning a degree as quickly as possible that they avoid taking English classes. Later, they realize to their regret that taking time to improve their English when they first arrived would have made all their studies (and their lives in general) easier, and probably have saved them time.

- ◆ Presence of Many Other Chinese Students

Many Chinese in the United States are graduate students in technical fields at large universities. Depending on the size of the surrounding community, they may find themselves able to carry out most of their academic and social interactions with other Chinese. They may live with other Chinese, study and socialize with them, and shop in Chinese grocery stores, where they can rent Chinese-language videos. If they are married to other Chinese who are in the United States with them, their encapsulation in a Chinese community can be virtually complete.

Thus, many Chinese students in the United States can avoid having to use English almost completely. Some students in this situation even experience a *decline* in their ability to speak English after they come to the United States.

Of course, any Chinese student can resist the temptation to live entirely within a Chinese community. But doing so requires special effort and determination.

- ◆ Shyness and Fear

Some individuals, not just Chinese but any others, are naturally shy. They are cautious in social situations. They do not like to draw attention to themselves. They fear being embarrassed or misunderstood. They fear not being able to understand what people say to them in another language.

Such people have much more difficulty practicing and learning a foreign language than do people who are more willing to speak up and less bothered by making a “mistake” in another language.

- ◆ Americans’ Reluctance to Point Out Errors

Even if you ask them to, most Americans will not point out grammatical or pronunciation errors you might make. The Americans may consider it “rude” to let you know when you say something incorrectly.

The Americans most likely to help you by correcting your errors are those trained in teaching English as a second language (ESL). Also, Americans with experience talking to students who speak other languages may be willing to help you.

- ◆ Age

College and university students are beyond the age when learning a new language is easy and natural. Generally, but not always, it is more difficult for people older than about 12 years to learn a new language—to remember vocabulary, develop new pronunciation habits, and feel at ease using a new language.

- ◆ Finding that Learning English is about More Than Learning a Language

Many speakers of other languages report feeling “different” when they speak in English. They feel “more free.” They think about things differently.

This is because a language embodies a culture, so that learning another language requires learning something about another culture. One outstanding example for Chinese is the English “I” and “me.” These words embody key concepts from an individualistic society. People from a collectivist society such as China may at first have trouble understanding what they mean to native English speakers, and knowing just how to use them.

Learning about a new culture, as well as a new language, is challenging and tiring.

2.4. Ways to Improve English

Learning a foreign language is easier for some people than others. Whether learning another language is comparatively easy or difficult for you, your *goals* and *attitude* about improving your English have a strong effect. If you are determined to use your United States experience to improve your English, and you make a conscious effort to do so, improvement is more likely.

There are many approaches to improving your English while you are in the United States. Of course you can use more than one of them.

Formal ESL (English-as-a-second-language) classes are available at many colleges and universities to help non-native speakers improve their command of English. These programs provide a variety of courses (such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, writing, and conversation) at a variety of levels (such as beginning, intermediate, and advanced). Some also offer “English for special purposes” classes, which focus on English as used in specific subject-matter areas such as business, science, or engineering.

In general, ESL courses aim to prepare students for real-life experience in American classrooms, laboratories, workplaces, and communities.

ESL programs might also have offerings for prospective teaching assistants and for graduate students at work on theses or dissertations.

These programs may also organize events and activities such as conversation partners and trips, and may be able to provide tutors for individualized instruction.

You can find information about ESL offerings at your school on the school's web site, if the school has not already sent it to you.

Tutors working with one or two students can offer individualized assistance to students at all levels.

Informal ESL conversation groups can provide helpful opportunities to discuss topics of mutual interest in a comfortable setting. Conversation groups are sometimes organized by international student offices, English-language centers, academic departments, churches, spouse organizations, and public libraries. Or, students can form their own groups.

Mass media can help in some ways. Television, radio, newspapers, and magazines can expose you to everyday English and give you information on topics you can discuss with other people—news events, social trends, athletic contests, and so on.

Toastmasters International is an organization devoted to the improvement of public speaking. Chinese and other college and university students in the United States have found Toastmasters to be an excellent avenue not just to improving their English but to developing the self-confidence necessary for success in their professional lives. Information is available at www.toastmasters.org/indexbk.htm.

Do-it-yourself English improvement is probably the most accessible form of English-language practice available to foreign students. But it requires some determination and preparation. The remainder of this chapter gives detailed guidance for practicing English on your own.

Do-It-Yourself English Improvement

Improving your English on your own—without classes or tutors—requires first some mental preparations, then some actions.

First, some mental preparations.

1. Never forget that *improving your English is one of your main goals* while you are studying in the United States.
2. Resolve to *practice English every day* (or nearly every day). Make a *commitment* to yourself: “I will practice English with an American (or another foreign student who speaks English well) at least ten minutes every day.” (It is easier to start with a modest objective. You can plan for longer practice sessions later.) Then make a *plan* to fit English into your daily schedule. For example, “On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I will practice English for at least ten minutes during the noon hour.” And so on. Decide

when your daily schedule has room for some English practice. *Start immediately!* The longer you wait to get started, the harder it will be to start.

3. *Overcome your anxieties.* The idea of speaking English with Americans you do not know may make you nervous. Here are some suggestions for overcoming your anxiety:

- Remind yourself again what you can *gain* from improving your English.
- Remind yourself what you will *lose* if you do not improve your English.
- Ask yourself, “What is the worst thing that can happen if I try to talk with an American and get a negative response?” What *is* the worst thing that could happen? Maybe the person will say “no.” Maybe the person will walk away from you. The person might even say something unpleasant to you, or behave rudely. Could you survive that? *Of course you could.*

--To get an idea what to expect in your interactions with Americans, review Chapter 3, “Culture Matters.”

Second, take some actions to improve your English.

Action One: Prepare some conversation topics.

Action Two: Locate people to talk to.

Action Three: Approach people you can talk to.

Each of these three actions is discussed below.

One: Prepare Some Conversation Topics

You may feel reluctant to approach Americans because you do not know what to talk about. But there are hundreds of things you could discuss! Get some topics ready in advance. Memorize them, or have them written down so you can refer to them. Here are a few possibilities:

- Reasons you (both) came to the particular school you are attending
- Your plans for after you graduate
- Your families—where they are, what your parents’ positions are, any siblings you have
- Description of the place you lived when you were children
- Experiences you remember from your early childhoods
- What you can remember about your primary-school years
- How you celebrated birthdays when you were children
- How various U.S. holidays are celebrated
- How you spend your weekends
- What you like to read about
- Words or slang expressions you have heard but did not understand (write them down when you hear them, and have them ready to discuss)
- Something in the day’s newspaper
- Plans for the coming summer

- Popular television programs or personalities
- Places to eat in your community

Two: Locate People to Talk To

Here are some suggestions for finding someone to talk to:

--Find people who *share your interests*.

- If there is a student organization for people in your field of study, join it and volunteer to do some of the organization's work.
- If you play sports, go to a recreation center or playing field.
- Join a club based on your interest. (The Student Activities Office—which may have some other name on your campus—will have a list of recognized student organizations. The list might be on the office's web site. The local public library will probably have a list of organizations in your community.)

--Volunteer to help at the local public library or some other local organization.

--Talk to people who spend time in the same places you do, people such as *classmates, library staff, neighbors, and departmental secretaries* (volunteer to help the secretary with some small task, and talk while you are doing it).

--Consider joining a *Bible-study group*, after assuring yourself that its members are not seeking to convert you to their religious views.

--Force yourself to attend social functions where there will be many people who do not speak Chinese.

--Find *people at leisure* (that is, people who are not obviously busy). For example, you could approach people who are:

- sitting in a lounge in a dormitory, classroom building, or the student union
- sitting on a bench at a mall or in the park
- watching TV in a public place, and waiting for a commercial to end
- eating in the cafeteria
- taking a study break at the library
- waiting for a performance or a class to begin
- sitting beside you in class
- sitting beside you on a bus or subway

Of course, you need to be prudent about approaching strangers. You need to feel generally comfortable in the situation. People you approach should be ones who appear to be open and receptive.

Three: Approach People You Can Talk To

Be committed to practicing English. Have a topic in mind. Look for someone who seems available to talk. *Don't hesitate!* Walk up to the person and:

- a. Smile! (For Americans, a smile is a sign of friendliness and good intentions.)
- b. Introduce yourself. Say, "Hello. My name is _____. I'm new here, and I would like to practice my English. Can you talk with me for a few minutes?" (If you have a name that Americans have trouble pronouncing, have it written down so you can show it to the person.)

You can also say, after introducing yourself, that you "really need to practice English."

- c. Say something about yourself: "I'm from China. I'm a student majoring in _____. I came here in _____."
- d. Bring up a topic. For example, "I have some words here that I don't know the meaning of. Can you tell me what they mean?" Or, "I wonder if I could ask you about [whatever topic you choose from your list]."
- e. After the conversation, say "Thank you, I enjoyed talking with you," or "I hope to see you again sometime."

Persist! If your first few attempts to start a conversation do not work out, do not be discouraged. Keep trying. And after you have some successful conversations, keep it up!