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Learning Strategies

This chapter presents learning strategies that will help to identify and reduce errors.



Essentials

1. After you have identified the areas of your spoken English that you need to work on, use learning strategies to help you systematically reduce the frequency of your errors.
2. To improve the fluency of your spoken English, speak English as much as you can every single day.
3. Even if you live in a non–English speaking country, you can increase the amount of time you spend speaking English every day.

What Helps Us Learn English?

Most of you are probably finding that although you have studied English vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation rules for years, it is still difficult to put the words and structures together quickly and accurately during free speech. Don't despair! It is possible to improve in even a short amount of time.

Two learning strategies that will help are called **covert rehearsal** and **self-monitoring**. These two learning strategies, when used together, can be effective in helping to improve your spoken English.

Covert Rehearsal

Covert rehearsal is a strategy that is often used by successful language learners. It literally means “private practice,” or practicing speaking English out loud when you are alone.

Professor Wayne Dickerson of the University of Illinois describes covert rehearsal this way:

Covert Rehearsal is the time we spend by ourselves each day talking to ourselves in the target language, participating in made-up conversations, listening closely to our articulations, critiquing the accuracy and fluency of our language use, examining our speech to see if it follows language rules we know and language examples we have heard. Our time spent in Covert Rehearsal is language-teaching and language-learning time.¹

Log It!

Once you start listing your errors in your logbook, you can use this information to help you choose topics for covert rehearsal.

During covert rehearsal, practice the aspects of English that you know you need to improve. Examples of topics to practice include:

- selected vowel or consonant sounds
- linking words in phrases
- correct stress on syllables and words
- production of accurate past-tense markers
- use of new vocabulary correctly

Think about a typical day. Examples of hidden opportunities for language practice are:

- while walking/riding to class or work
- while stuck in traffic
- while waiting for the bus or train
- while washing the dishes, cleaning, or cooking
- while watching TV, during the commercials

¹ From Dickenson, Wayne B. 1989. Good language learners must be good language teachers. *International teaching assistants, Illinois Instructor Series*. University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.

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Make the most of every opportunity to practice covert rehearsal by keeping these points in mind:

- Speak out loud. It may feel silly to talk to yourself, but you really can't evaluate yourself if you only speak in your head. Challenge yourself to try covert rehearsal for just a few minutes several times a day. Practicing will make it less embarrassing.

One Student Says

"When I'm doing covert rehearsal in public, people just assume I'm talking into the earpiece of my cell phone. Only I know my phone is off and I'm using the time to improve my English."

- Pick one goal at a time. For example, an appropriate goal would be "improving the /v/ sound" but not "pronouncing clear vowels and consonants." (See Chapter 6 for more information on choosing appropriate pronunciation goals.) It is very difficult (or impossible) to focus on improving too many aspects at once. Make a list of what to work on using the errors from your logbook.
- Be patient and give yourself enough time to see progress with each item. After you begin to improve with a certain item, challenge yourself by adding another item to focus on at the same time.
- Practice throughout the day. Good results can be achieved when you practice several times a day—even if it is just for a few minutes at a time.
- Learn how to listen carefully and evaluate yourself. Does your sound match the sounds you have heard? Are you following the rules you know? If not, continue to practice. When you do hear improvements, give yourself praise. You earned it!

One Student Says

"Last month I interviewed for a position at a university in the U.S. I was told by many scholars in the field that my research, publishing, and teaching experience would get me the job. I sent in my CV, letters of recommendation, and samples of my writing, and I gave a job talk. It turned out that they based their decision primarily on the job talk, and I didn't get the position. Now I know that next time I prepare a job talk, I need to use covert rehearsal to practice."

It may seem strange that a good way to improve your speaking is to talk to yourself, but that is exactly what you have to do. During conversations with other people, you have too many demands on your attention. You must listen to what the other person is saying, think of what you want to say, and think of how to say it. This is a difficult time to try to use new sounds, structures, and vocabulary.

After practicing a specific feature of language during covert rehearsal, practice it during conversations with other people. Often it is more comfortable to continue to do covert rehearsal instead of practicing new skills while speaking with another person. When you are alone, you have no pressure, no time constraints, and no threat that you will embarrass yourself by making errors. In the real world it is not enough if you only sound clear and accurate when you are alone talking to yourself. You must also learn to be comfortable and accurate when talking to others.

Exercise 5.1. Covert Rehearsal

- A. 1. Imagine you are at a job interview and you are asked one of these questions:
- Tell me about your first job.
 - Tell me about some of the classes you took when you were an undergraduate.
 - Tell me about a situation where you took a leadership position.
 - Tell me about some professional development activities you have participated in (for example: conferences, seminars, classes).
2. Choose one question. Write a short list of key words and phrases related to it.
3. Find a spot or a corner of the room to practice covert rehearsal. It may help to face the wall so that you are not distracted by your classmates.
4. After the signal from your teacher, begin answering the question out loud. Try to ignore the other students around you who are also practicing. You can stop and re-start as many times as you need to, but continue practicing until the instructor calls time.
5. Your teacher may ask the class to repeat the activity, each time answering a different question.
- B. Answer the questions.
- Have you done covert rehearsal in the past? If yes, when and what did you do? _____

 - How did it feel to practice covert rehearsal here in class? What was easy for you? What was hard? _____

 - Describe your typical day. When do you have opportunities to do covert rehearsal throughout your day? _____

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One Student Says

“I’m a naturally shy person, so it is difficult for me to speak with native speakers. So before I go to meetings or a party, I plan out some small talk and use covert rehearsal to practice it. When I get to the party, I have more confidence. I think I’ll always be shy, but now I feel like I have something to say.”

Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring is paying close attention to one specific aspect of your grammar or pronunciation (for example, accurate past-tense verbs or accurate /f/ sounds) while you are conversing. Self-monitoring will help you remember to produce the accurate version. With practice, you will produce the accurate form in free speech even when you aren’t paying attention in high-pressure conditions like talking on the phone, giving presentations, and taking the TOEIC® Speaking Test.

Here are several crucial points to remember about self-monitoring:

- Identify a language feature from your logbook to focus on before the conversation begins.
- During the conversation, practice self-monitoring even if it slows your rate of speech. At first it will be quite difficult, but the more you practice, the easier it will become.
- After the conversation, evaluate how successful you were at monitoring the feature of English you selected.
- At first, self-monitor only during low-stress conversations. When a particular conversation makes you nervous or is very important, it’s harder to improve just one aspect of your speech.

One Student Says

“I used to try to monitor when I met with my advisor, but I was too self-conscious and forgot what to say. Now I try to monitor when I talk to friends, my wife, and other people I feel really comfortable around.”

- Even if you are very disciplined in your practice, changes do not happen overnight. Give yourself credit for even small improvements. For example, if you used to make an error saying the /f/ sound 90 percent of the time and now you only make the error 30 percent of the time, that's progress you can be proud of!

If you are consistent in your self-monitoring, the specific aspects of your speech that had previously been incorrect will improve. Although this process can be slow, once the correct form has taken root, it will transfer into your free speech, and you will use the correct form without having to think about it.

Exercise 5.2. Self-Monitoring

A. Work with a partner. Pretend that you and your partner are preparing to go on job interviews. Take turns asking and answering these common interview questions. As you are answering, continually monitor for accurate past tense. As you listen, use a check mark (✓) every time your partner uses the past tense correctly and an X every time he or she makes a mistake.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Can you tell me more about your work history?
3. Can you tell me about the courses you took as an undergraduate (or graduate) student?
4. Tell me about your last project at work.

B. Answer the questions.

1. How easy or difficult was it to monitor your partner's speech? Did you learn anything that can help you monitor yourself? _____

2. Have you practiced self-monitoring in the past? If yes, when? Was it effective? _____

3. Describe the typical conversations you have in English. In the course of your day, are there any low-stress conversations where you can practice self-monitoring? _____

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Speaking Opportunities

If you live in an English-speaking country, challenge yourself to speak in English with native speakers every day. This is not easy, but it is crucial for improvement.

These suggestions may help you increase your use of English:

1. List all of the people at work you could speak English with. Make a commitment to try to talk to each of them every week.
2. List people in your neighborhood who you could speak with in English. For example, find out about some upcoming events in your area and plan to ask your neighbors about these events. Try to speak to at least one of these people every week.
3. Go to shops and stores that aren't very busy. Go during a weekday when there aren't as many customers. Ask the salespeople questions about their products and services. Try to extend the conversations.

One Student Says

"I used to hang up when telemarketers called me. But now I stay on the phone and use the time for English practice. I make sure that I ask several questions about the product or service. I also practice paraphrasing back to them what they have told me to make sure that I have heard them correctly. It's great practice!"

If you don't live in an English-speaking country, these suggestions might help:

1. Speak English with other non-native speakers. Perhaps this method won't help you improve your accuracy (if the others are at lower level than you are), but it will help you improve your fluency. It will also give you an excellent opportunity to self-monitor and improve your own accuracy.
2. Are you using English at work? If so, make the most of it! Each time you speak English, push yourself to speak longer. Think of questions ahead of time to extend conversations for extra practice. If possible, record and evaluate yourself when you make presentations, talk on the phone, or participate in a discussion.

3. Call English-speaking countries to get product or service information. Are you planning to visit or live in an English-speaking country someday? Call travel agents, hotels, tourist centers, entertainment centers, stores, etc., to get information and to practice your English. Use the Internet to help find phone numbers. Again, think of several questions ahead of time so that you can extend the conversations.

One Student Says

“I live in Russia and I plan to apply to graduate programs in the U.S. I used to research programs on the Internet, but now I force myself to call the schools I’m interested in. The first time I did it, I was so nervous nothing came out of my mouth, and I hung up. Some calls are still challenging, but I’m learning a lot.”

4. Talk back to the TV! Watch English language shows or movies on TV or the Internet and talk back to the characters. Give your opinion on news items, summarize plot lines, or try to mimic the actors’ voices. Listen for new words and phrases and add them to your logbook.

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Exercise 5.3. Speaking Opportunities

Answer the questions.

1. Review the suggestions for creating speaking opportunities. For each suggestion, list if you have ever tried it, if you tried it in the past week, if you practice it regularly, or if you want to try it.

2. Describe a typical day or week in your life. What opportunities do you normally have to speak in English?

3. Set goals. Choose two speaking opportunities to try next week. After you have tried them, write about your experiences in your logbook.

One Student Says

“With everything I do, I try to think about how I can increase my chance of speaking English. I used to make myself coffee at home every morning, but now I go to the corner coffee shop. I still don’t have a 100% chance of having a conversation in English, but I have a much better chance than if I stayed home.”

Native-Speaker Helpers

A native-speaker helper is a native or near-native speaker who can help you understand how spoken English is used. Ideally, you should look for helpers among your friends. They do not have to be teachers, but they should be people with whom you have contact daily or weekly. They should also be people with English-speaking skills that you admire. Appendix B provides a list of tips for native or near-native speakers who are working with learners preparing for the TOEIC® Speaking Test.

When you are speaking to your helper, ask for feedback when you aren't sure if your pronunciation or stress is correct. You can say, for example:

Tomorrow Theresa and I are going to look at the amortization tables for the Green Street project. Is that how you say it, amortiZAtion?

or

Did the report include all of the mergers from last year? MERgers, is that right?

When you aren't sure how a specific phrase is used, ask your helper to use it in a sentence or ask him or her in what context it would be used. You can ask, for example:

During the meeting, Cynthia said that she wanted to “keep me in the loop.”
What did she mean?*

or

I need to ask the project manager if I can take two weeks off next summer to go back to Japan to visit my family. What's a good way to ask him?

Ask your helper to correct your English. In general, native speakers of English will *not* correct your English unless you request it directly. If native speakers find your English difficult to understand, they may avoid talking to you in the future, but they most likely won't correct you or tell you directly that they find you difficult to understand. It would be considered impolite.

One Student Says

“Our firm just hired a new architect. She's from Argentina, and this is her first job in the United States. Sometimes she makes mistakes in her English, and it's hard to follow what she's saying. I'd like to help her out and correct her, but I don't want to be rude. But now she just keeps on making the same mistakes over and over.”

* in the loop = informed, updated on current projects

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If you would like correction, use phrases like these to ask for help:

I'm working on my English for an important test I have to take in a couple months. Would you mind correcting my English when you hear me make a mistake? It would really help me.

or

As you can tell, English isn't my native language, so when you hear me make a mistake, if I use a word wrong or pronounce something incorrectly, I would really appreciate it if you would correct me. I promise I won't get offended.

or

By the way, please let me know when I make mistakes with English.

You will probably have to ask **repeatedly** to be corrected so that your helpers won't feel rude. Be sure to thank them when they do correct you. For example, *Thank you. I'll write that down so I remember it.* Then write it in your logbook. When people correct you, the best way to thank them is to try your best to integrate the correction into your speech.