

# BEATING the ODDS

Success Stories of Students Overcoming English Language Challenges

prepared by

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UNIVERSITY of TORONTO  
SCARBOROUGH

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# BEATING the ODDS

## Success Stories of Students Overcoming English Language Challenges

Introduction	1
Could You Benefit from English Language Development (ELD)?	2
Key Components of English Language Development Support	4
Student Success Stories	5
<b>YING HUANG</b>	6
First year	
<b>DIANA XIAO EN LIU</b>	7
Second year	
<b>ADAM LIU</b>	8
Second year	
<b>JULIE PELOQUIN</b>	9
Third year	
<b>SOPHIA SUN</b>	10
Third year	
<b>KATE LING</b>	11
Third year	
<b>DOMINIQUE FEVRY</b>	12
Final year	
Charting Your Own Success	13
Which Spirals Are You On?	14
Define Your Action Plan	16
Support for Academic Writing and English Language Development	17
Conclusions	18
Pedagogic Perspective	18
References	18

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## INTRODUCTION

The chance to study at university is exciting for students and their families. Students want to do well, but many discover in their first term that the language skills needed at university are much higher than at high school. In university writing assignments and oral presentations, students are expected to show critical analysis and present a good argument, as well as to write and speak in a more sophisticated voice. In upper-year courses, readings are complex and abstract, and writing assignments are increasingly demanding.

Many students find that their previous learning strategies do not work well at university. While they may feel comfortable chatting in English, they realize they cannot handle the more formal English in their textbooks. When students are not familiar with formal academic writing, or with skills for academic reading, they find it difficult to begin working on their assignments. It is not just ESL students who face these problems. Many students who grew up speaking English also feel challenged when faced with academic reading and writing. It can be very easy to get discouraged and start on a downward spiral that makes it more and more difficult to do well. Doing nothing to remedy a small and seemingly insignificant problem can quickly lead to bigger and more serious problems.

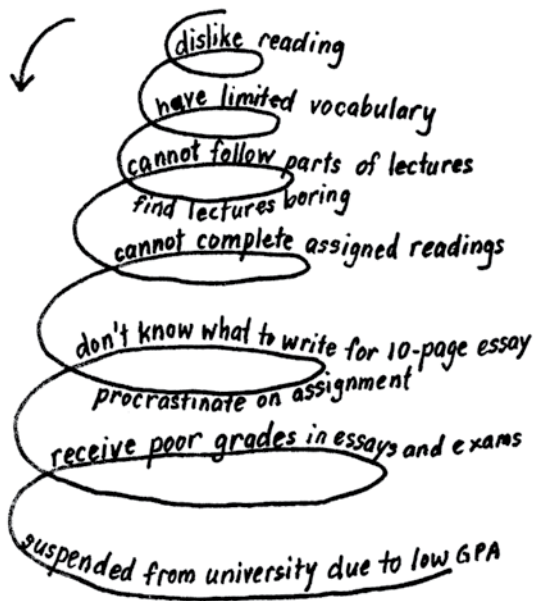


Figure 1.

An example of deterioration on a negative spiral

Some students employ “survival” strategies such as avoiding courses with writing assignments or oral presentations, or asking friends who are more proficient in English to help them with their assignments. What they may not realize is that they are depriving themselves of the opportunity to work on their weaknesses and perhaps even turn them into strengths.

## The Good News...

It is not as hard as you may think to get onto a positive spiral.

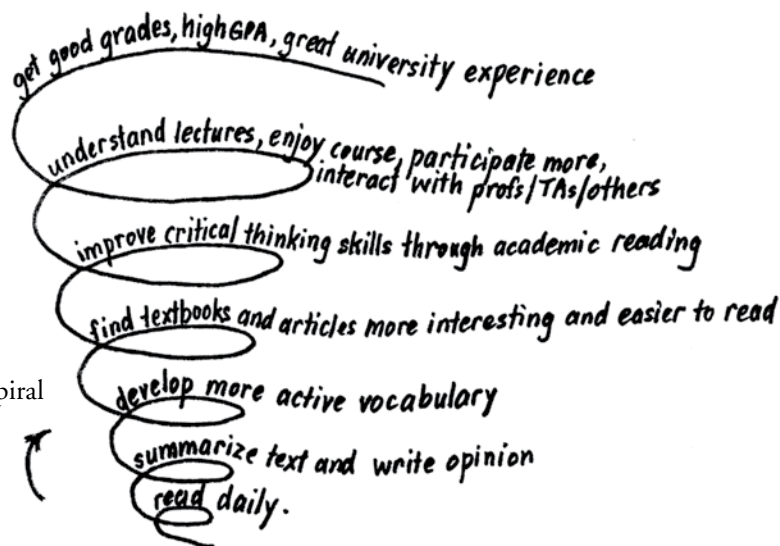


Figure 2.

An example of improvement on a positive spiral

Work done by students at the University of Toronto Scarborough shows that by using the right strategies to meet individual learning needs, it is possible to get on a positive spiral very quickly. Although research (e.g. Collier, 1987; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Klesmer, 1994) shows that learning a second language for academic purposes can take up to seven years, these students have demonstrated that it is possible to make dramatic improvements even within a semester. In other words, these students have beaten the odds. Our goal is to inspire other students—maybe even you—to take on the challenge of improving your academic English language skills, and to outline some resources available at the University of Toronto Scarborough to help you.

Do you want to speed up your acquisition of competence in English? Do you want to achieve a good GPA in your program of study? If you feel your standard of English is already quite good, would you like to do even better? Making a leap into the next level of achievement is possible if you are willing to put in effort and use the guidance available on campus.

### English Language Development

English Language Development (ELD) is the term used at the University of Toronto Scarborough to refer to the program developed by The Writing Centre to encourage ALL university students (not just English as a Second Language students) to improve their ability to communicate well in an academic environment.

See <<http://www.utoronto.ca/ELD>>.

### Could You Benefit from English Language Development?

Language- and culture-related challenges can be major obstacles to academic success. So can inefficient strategies to cope with the types of critical thinking and communication needed in university courses. Some common problems are listed in Table 1. Read through the list and see if any of these describe you.

**Tick the categories that apply to you.**

Table 1. Common problems in academic communication

	READING
<input type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not reading fast enough to cope with course readings</li> <li>• Finding academic texts too complex to understand due to insufficient vocabulary</li> <li>• Needing to translate into your mother tongue when trying to understand English texts</li> <li>• Taking too long to read a text and spending too much effort to look up meanings of unfamiliar words</li> <li>• Having difficulty understanding texts even after looking up words</li> </ul>
	LISTENING
<input type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inability to understand a great deal of what the professor is saying in class</li> <li>• Lack of vocabulary to follow what others are saying</li> <li>• Unfamiliarity with references to Canadian or Western culture</li> </ul>
	WRITING
<input type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty organizing your thoughts to meet the requirements of a writing assignment</li> <li>• Finding it a challenge to write in academic style</li> <li>• Insufficient time to write and plan assignments because of time spent on reading for them</li> <li>• Inability to express your ideas in clear precise English</li> <li>• Insufficient vocabulary in English to express your ideas in the most appropriate way (vocabulary and sentence construction may sound simplistic)</li> <li>• Difficulty switching from mother-tongue style in writing</li> <li>• Unfamiliarity with expectations of North American university-level written assignments</li> <li>• Difficulty switching from oral to written style</li> <li>• Discouragement at low grades on assignments in spite of effort put in</li> </ul>
	SPEAKING
<input type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not confident participating in class discussions</li> <li>• Not using English except for course-related needs</li> <li>• Too shy to speak to others in English</li> <li>• Feeling that others do not understand your efforts to share your opinion</li> <li>• Insufficient vocabulary to present complex thoughts during discussions or presentations</li> <li>• Feeling that your pronunciation is not clear</li> </ul>

If you have ticked any of the categories above, you are not alone. Hundreds of other students on campus have similar problems. Look at the spirals on pages 14–15 and identify which ones apply to you.

## **Key Components Of English Language Development Support**

In the next section on students' success stories, you will find the students referring to some of these key ELD components. These components are designed to address the language- and culture-related challenges students face at university.

### **ELD Consultations**

These one-on-one confidential sessions address the unique needs of individual students. Students' previous and current experiences with English language learning and development are taken into consideration when mapping the priorities of language- and culture-related needs that have to be attended to. Attending regular consultations over a period of time enables students to progress on the positive spirals.

### **Writing Centre Tutorials**

In these one-on-one tutorial sessions, students work on their course assignments and learn how to be better writers in the process. Students are guided on how to develop and showcase high level critical thinking skills in their writing.

### **Reading and Writing by Email (RWE)**

The RWE program focuses on vocabulary and reading, while building confidence in writing. After an ELD consultation, a student can begin an action plan that includes reading appropriate texts online, with the help of an interactive dictionary software that facilitates the student's understanding of unfamiliar words as he/she reads. The student then emails a short paragraph or two to the ELD Coordinator. Priority areas of need are addressed during future ELD consultations.

### **Communication Café**

Using specially designed games, the Communication Café provides a supportive environment for students to develop their critical thinking skills, expand their vocabulary, improve their creativity, presentation and writing skills. The Café also provides more confident students with the opportunity to develop their facilitation and discussion leadership skills. See <<http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/ELD/Cafe.html>>.

### **English Language Development Summer Learning Institute (ELD SLI)**

The ELD SLI is an intensive non-credit program offered to incoming first year students to the University of Toronto Scarborough in order to give them a headstart transitioning from high school or other cultures into a Canadian university. This highly interactive program focuses on the critical areas of academic language development—academic vocabulary, critical reading, academic writing and presentation skills for academic success. Students also write a university-level assignment and make an oral presentation, and they receive detailed constructive feedback from course instructors. Through experiential learning as well as through enjoyable learning tasks or games, students acquire the skills they need to do well in their first year at university and beyond. See <<http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~tlswweb/SLI.htm>>.



## Student Success Stories

These seven students have been chosen from among many ELD students who have moved themselves onto positive spirals and overcome their language- and culture-related problems. By showcasing the successful English language development of real students—students whom you see on campus, students just like you—we hope that you will feel inspired to make a commitment to your own English language development, just as they did. Although ELD applies to ALL students, the success stories chosen for representation here are those of English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers since ESL students face significantly more English language challenges compared to the rest of the student population (see, for example, Fox, 2005; Watt and Roessingh, 2001). The stories of these seven students have been selected because the combination of their circumstances, struggles, strategies and advice speak to a wide spectrum of needs.

These students made dramatic improvements within very short time frames. **Ying** began scoring A's and B's in courses like Psychology and Anthropology within a year. **Diana's** confidence developed so much that within a year of starting ELD, she had begun taking leadership roles in assisting the ELD Coordinator to help more ESL students. **Adam's** spectacular improvement in academic vocabulary within six months and his ability to actively participate in class discussions (compared to his complete silence in classes the previous semester) inspired other students to strive to be like him. **Julie's** goal to become an effective writer in time for her Co-op placement was achieved within six weeks. **Sophia's** oral communication skills improved so much that she was able to conduct herself well even when interviewed over the phone. Despite her diagnosed learning disability, **Kate**, who had been on academic suspension, regained good standing within a year. Within a semester of starting on her ELD, **Dominique**, in her final year, found herself achieving her best set of grades despite a very hectic extracurricular schedule.

As you read, highlight parts which closely relate to you. Try to see yourself achieving similarly dramatic improvements from the level you are at right now.



## **YING HUANG**

First year, Management

**Home Languages:** Mandarin and Cantonese

When I came to University of Toronto Scarborough as a transfer student from another Canadian university, I couldn't speak and write well in English. I was afraid my poor English ability would prevent me from achieving a good GPA. So, I enrolled in the ELD Summer Learning Institute. I learned so many useful things—critical thinking, academic vocabulary, reading academic texts, oral presentation, writing university assignments, etc. Because everything was done in a fun way, I enjoyed learning, got a good foundation and became confident.

Many of my ESL friends had strongly advised me to postpone taking PSYA01 as there was lots of writing to do. However, I loved the course, and was delighted when my first writing assignment that was “blind” peer-reviewed by five classmates earned me a mark of 8/10. That encouraged me and gave me great confidence for future assignments. I surprised my friends by scoring A– in PSYA01. I earned the good marks by making myself very familiar with the course material. I took every opportunity (e.g. while walking home, waiting in line or for the subway) to explain Psychology concepts to my friends in English, sometimes relating their experiences to Psychology concepts.

I strongly advise ESL students not to be afraid of speaking up or answering questions during class/tutorial. Although my English sounded awful and hard to understand at first, I spoke up in class. And I found everyone—my professor, TA and classmates—very supportive. They appreciated my contribution. It did not matter that my English was not good; they were interested in my ideas. My native speaker classmates helped me out by paraphrasing my points in a clearer way. That helped me learn very quickly how to express those ideas better. As a result of my participation in class, I have earned not only deeper knowledge about the topic but the respect and friendship of native speaker classmates. By participating actively in class/tutorial, I enjoy my courses very much. I also go for office hours, and enjoy discussion of the topics we are learning with my profs and TAs. That makes me understand the subject much better and get better marks. I urge ESL students not to be afraid of asking their profs questions. Just studying long hours in the library while your questions are unanswered makes studying very hard and inefficient. I am so happy to have a good rapport with my profs and TAs—it makes studying the course so enjoyable and meaningful.

### **Starting point:**

Ying was unable to express herself sufficiently in spoken English to sustain conversation even at a minimal level. Her writing was even more incoherent. However, she was extremely determined and willing to take risks in speaking and writing.

### **What she achieved:**

Within a year, she was scoring A's and B's in her Psychology and Anthropology courses.

### **Key strategies:**

- Worked on active vocabulary development
- Practised critical thinking when reading or learning new information (instead of just passive memorization/acceptance of information)
- Attended ELD SLI to learn foundation skills for academic success at university
- Explained newly-learned knowledge to a friend in English
- Answered questions and spoke up in class/tutorial
- Attended office hours and engaged in discussions with professors or TAs
- Established friendships with native speaker classmates



## **DIANA XIAO EN LIU**

Second year, International Studies Co-op

**Home Languages:** Chinese and Spanish

Since my first year at university, I felt the urgency to work on improving my written communication skills. Within two months of starting the RWE program, I could see improvements in the way I was writing. This program disciplines me to read extensively and trains me to express my ideas clearly within a short time frame. Now I am able to write longer and more complex sentences, but at the same time keeping correct sentence structure. I can also convey my ideas more explicitly in the way expected in academic writing. Furthermore, I have come to realize that vocabulary development is an ongoing process and is important for writing well academically. Therefore, it has become my habit to look up the meaning of new words and use them at the earliest opportunity (e.g. e-mails, journals, assignments, conversations, etc.) so that I have them in my active vocabulary. Doing it this way is more effective than making a list of new words and their meanings, and then trying to memorize them.

Reading the right type of texts helped me learn words most useful for my courses. For example, reading the Business section of the Globe and Mail helped me to be familiar with many words that my Economics professor used. Before working on ELD, I used to be very frustrated by many terms I did not understand in class or in my textbook. Now when my professors use certain words, I am thankful that I have come across those words and their meanings many times before. I am really glad I followed Dr. Khoo's method for vocabulary expansion using the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) software. Her method has accelerated my vocabulary development in a rather painless way. Before I used LDOCE, finding the meanings of the terms was too troublesome. Now, if I am reading online, I just have to click on the unfamiliar word, and the meaning pops up automatically in a little window at the corner of the screen. The words I have learned through my online reading have helped me with reading and writing academic papers. An important strategy I would encourage all students to do when reading academic papers is to read actively and critically—and make outline notes or create mind-maps that use keywords to connect important ideas or concepts. Don't just highlight chunks of text as it is a less active and less effective way of understanding your academic text compared to making mind-maps or outline notes.

### **Starting point:**

Diana did poorly in English in Grade 12 and was worried about being able to cope with academic reading and writing at the university level. Her vocabulary and writing style were basic.

### **What she achieved:**

Diana has become a more confident and assertive writer. Critical thinking can be seen in the way she expresses her opinion. She has maintained a high GPA.

### **Key strategies:**

- Participated in the RWE program
- Actively learned new vocabulary items and used them as soon as possible in writing and speaking
- Read the newspaper and other sources for topics related to courses
- Used the LDOCE software when reading online
- Wrote daily entries in a personal journal
- Actively made outline notes or mind-maps when reading academic articles



## **ADAM LIU**

Second year, Political Science &  
International Studies Co-op

**Home Language:** Mandarin

Arriving as an international student a few days before term began, everything seemed challenging. I felt marginalized and was silent in tutorials. Whenever I tried to raise my hand, my courage would suddenly vanish as doubts of my ability gripped me.

I was determined to extricate myself from being trapped by an insurmountable language disadvantage. Over the last six months, I have capitalized on ELD exercises to expand my vocabulary and develop better writing skills. I have also benefited tremendously from the Communication Café sessions through which I have developed my self-confidence. After attending the Cafés, I stopped seeking haven-like corners in tutorials from where I could just be an indifferent and insignificant spectator. I am happy that I am now participating actively in discussion.

Expanding my vocabulary (academic and general) is my top priority. I use various strategies, such as reading academic texts, collecting newspaper articles related to my courses, and participating in relevant extracurricular activities. Reading academic texts allows me to learn the writing styles of expert writers, while collecting relevant newspaper articles enables me to learn more effective usage of vocabulary that is also found in my academic texts. To further my vocabulary expansion through extracurricular activities, I registered with the Munk Center for International Studies which sends me weekly emails of upcoming events related to my discipline. I learn the meaning(s) of new words and make it a point to use those words in correct contexts as soon as possible. For example, when I posed a question at the microphone during the Sino-Japanese Conference 2007, I used the phrase “a modicum of consensus” which I had just learned two days earlier.

Being observant in an English-speaking environment is very important. I pay close attention to native speakers’ pronunciation and imitate their enunciation and intonation. During one subway ride, the father sitting beside me was explaining to his two young sons the proper pronunciation of the word “millennium” and its plural form. Immediately, I practiced it silently in my mind. Language development is an incremental process. We can make remarkable progress if we capitalize on university academic resources and proactively seek chances to improve. Learning opportunities are not only in lecture halls; they exist ubiquitously.

### **Starting point:**

Adam was not able to get the grades he was aiming for in his assignments. He could not participate in class discussions for fear of mispronouncing words and showing his lack of fluency.

### **What he achieved:**

Within 6 months, Adam scored A-'s and A's for his written assignments. He has become an active participant in discussions during tutorials.

### **Key strategies:**

- Tried to be observant about English language usage
- Tried to use new vocabulary as soon as possible after encountering the new vocabulary item
- ‘Interacted’ with academic texts and attempted to emulate expert styles
- Participated in extracurricular activities to enhance academic communication skills
- Engaged in ELD programs such as RWE, and the Communication Café.



## **JULIE PELOQUIN**

Third year, Business Management Co-op

**Home Language:** French

As a transfer student, I had completed all my required English courses in other academic establishments. Hence, when I transferred to U of T Scarborough and started to search for internships, it was months since the last time I had to write essays, letters, memos, etc. I was very insecure about my ability to effectively communicate in writing. I knew the importance of being a good communicator to succeed in the business world. So, I started to work with Dr. Khoo and wrote one short text every day, based on articles of my choice. At first, the task was so tedious! I would get stuck on every word, and I was practically ashamed to send my texts. Thankfully, my first ELD consultation proved to be very useful. She was able to pinpoint my common mistakes, and most importantly, she managed to boost my confidence. I realized that my abilities as a writer were only limited by the efforts that I was putting into perfecting my writing skills and style, and expanding my vocabulary. From that point on, reading articles became an integral part of my daily routine. As weeks passed by, I found myself writing about different subjects with more ease—and definitely more confidence! An amazing tool that I started to use was the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE), which was full of concrete examples, expressions and synonyms. Six weeks later, I can truly state that I make use of a more professional vocabulary and that I am on the way to mastering the ability to use the right words in the right contexts. My biggest achievement has been to write texts in English as quickly and efficiently as I would write them in French.

### **Midway through her internship at General Motors, she wrote:**

*My Co-op work term is going great! I am so glad that I was proactive about preparing for it! For the first few weeks of my internship, I had to research certain marketing topics on the web, and write reports about relevant articles. Thanks to my ELD consultations, I had practised just the right skills! Another crucial part of my role was to write memos to employees from other departments, or to third parties outside the organization, to inquire about some procedures and organize events. It is amazing to see how my hard work ended up paying off! Enhancing my ability to write in English has proven to be very relevant to my current duties. Hopefully, other students will also understand the importance of being good communicators before they are faced with real challenges, and will be proactive in taking the necessary steps to be ready for the business world!*

### **Starting point:**

Julie was very anxious about her lack of ability to write and was seeking a private tutor. Initial writing was simplistic.

### **What she achieved:**

Within 6 weeks, she felt confident about her writing, and knowledgeable about the company that she would be working in for her Co-op placement.

### **Key strategies:**

- Focused on improving areas of weakness identified in ELD consultation
- Learned vocabulary in a meaningful context, in this case through extensive reading about GM
- Wrote daily to explore own thoughts and attempted to use new vocabulary
- Built confidence by monitoring personal progress in ELD through reflections





## **SOPHIA SUN**

Third year, Management Co-op

**Home Language:** Mandarin

As a new immigrant myself, I would say that immigrants or students from immigrant families must try to improve their English quickly. We also need to put in extra effort to find placement positions, volunteer work, and participate in campus/community events. Don't just attend lectures and then go home immediately. I developed my communication skills a great deal during my Work Study term. Dr. Khoo wanted me to use my technical skills and knowledge in helping her change the ELD website. I had to really struggle with my English in order to express my ideas or to negotiate with Dr. Khoo on her ideas. That experience improved my English quickly. Also, I had to do a lot of online reading when researching for the website. So much reading helped me get more knowledge and more new words. I became more confident to express my ideas in English. My understanding of English grammar and writing style improved a lot when we edited the texts to be posted on the web.

To improve my oral communication skills, I also volunteered as a facilitator at the Communication Café. I enjoyed encouraging other students to use English during the games although I was still trying to improve my own communication skills. The Café games made us speak more fluently in English, explore new words, learn from other participants, and help with real-life experience. The games helped us reduce our tendency to translate into our mother tongue all the time. Trying to support other ESL students made me improve faster. When IBM interviewed me on the phone, I found that I was able to think quickly in English and answer appropriately.

In order to improve our English faster, it is important that we don't feel shy about making mistakes. We can learn from our mistakes. We should try to make friends with native speakers of English and people from different cultural backgrounds. From the way native speakers speak and write, we can learn how to express ourselves better. I really hope that other students will also create opportunities that can improve their vocabulary. We need to be adventurous and use new vocabulary instead of using the same limited words again and again in our daily interaction. However, when there is an important event like a job interview or an important presentation, we should be more careful to use only words we are sure of, and we should speak slowly and clearly, paying attention to our tone. This way we can make others feel that we are communicating effectively.

### **Starting point:**

Sophia showed limited ability to express her ideas in English. Her speech was not easy to understand as she was constantly translating mentally from Mandarin.

### **What she achieved:**

Sophia improved on her oral communication skills so much that she successfully secured a Co-op placement at IBM through a telephone interview (which is much more challenging than a face-to-face interview). Her initial 8-month term with IBM has been extended for another 4 months.

### **Key strategies:**

- Looked for work and extra-curricular opportunities to improve English communication skills
- Worked on tasks which required higher level English proficiency
- Tried new expressions
- Tried to think in English instead of translating
- Spoke slowly and clearly so that others could understand her more clearly
- Volunteered as a facilitator for the Communication Café

## **KATE LING (a pseudonym)**

Third year, International Studies

### **Home Languages:** Cantonese and some English

I was suspended twice due to my low GPA. Before returning from suspension, I had an ELD appointment to identify my problems. I was advised to attend the English Language Development Summer Learning Institute. That was the turning point—I learned useful strategies for reading academic texts, expanding my academic vocabulary and writing assignments. This helped me in my first semester back. I continued with ELD consultations to further improve my reading and writing. Soon I realized that my perception of reading had changed. I used to dislike reading. When faced with academic reading for my courses, I found the texts so difficult and abstract that I gave up reading. As a result, I skipped lots of readings and could not do my assignments well. Now that I am making progress with my English Language Development, I find that I am enjoying reading much more. Reading helps improve my analytical and thinking skills on different topics. I feel very up-to-date on lots of current issues. The articles I read daily increase my vocabulary. After seeing a new word in different articles, I can use that word in my writing.

Because I read a great deal now, I find there is a positive impact on my writing. When writing, I have sometimes suddenly realized that I was subconsciously following some of the expressions from the authors. In the past, the profs used to say that my ideas were not coherent in my essays. That is not a problem any more. Now I enjoy learning and my academic status is back to good standing. Learning naturally is better than forced learning. I feel so motivated. I am now getting B's in my courses, and I am aiming to score some A's soon. Although I faced failures many times, I did not give up. I set small goals, achieved them and worked my way up. Having learned the type of my learning disability guided me in getting the help I needed. Focussing on English Language Development has been key to my positive learning experiences and my academic success.

We can achieve our goals even when we have a learning disability or face other challenges. We need to look for opportunities that enable us to continually improve our skills. The opportunities don't come to us if we passively sit back and hope/wait. I approached a professor and assisted in research. I helped with data analysis and researching of material. That experience made me confident about my ability to do academic work. I plan to go on to professional/graduate school.

### **Starting point:**

Kate was not confident due to earlier failures. Her writing was very difficult to follow due to the seeming lack of a logical flow of ideas. Before beginning ELD, she had been diagnosed with a learning disability.

### **What she achieved:**

Overcame her language obstacles, and became academically active. Achieved good standing within a year.

### **Key strategies:**

- Learned fundamental skills to cope with academic writing and reading at the university level
- Engaged in daily reading and writing to build vocabulary, fluency and confidence of expression
- Set small achievable short-term goals in order to reach the bigger goals
- Determined to achieve success despite her learning disability
- Had a positive attitude and refused to be limited by unnecessary barriers



## **DOMINIQUE FEVRY**

Final year, International Studies Program

**Home Languages:** Creole and French

In my first year at the University of Toronto Scarborough, I could hardly speak English or understand my lectures. All my previous education in Quebec was in French, but I wanted the challenge of studying in a prestigious English university. Coming to university was living my family's dream, and I really wanted to do well. Last semester I started working on my ELD and immediately benefited. I understood my texts better, had a wider vocabulary for writing my assignments and felt a lot more confident speaking to my professors.

I was doing six courses last semester, and I was extremely busy as a Head Residence Advisor. Also, I had lots of other extracurricular activities. I was looking for a more efficient way of dealing with reading academic texts, critical thinking, and expressing my ideas clearly and critically. For the daily RWE readings, I chose topics related to my courses. Since I was writing about those articles regularly, it was very easy for me to complete assignments of the opinion-pieces type. As I had been reading extensively, I had a clearer idea of what I wanted to write, and writing assignments were not as difficult as they used to be. I was able to complete them 10–12 times faster than I used to, and scored higher marks for them.

Once I learned how to mind-map during one of my ELD consultations, I was able to mind-map almost all academic texts that I had to read. Mind-mapping really helped me capture the connections between concepts that I was studying using keywords. By using these keywords when writing my assignments and exam questions, I sure sounded like I understood the subject very well. Also, being familiar with the key vocabulary in the areas made it easier for me to understand more abstract ideas in the subject. Before I used mind-mapping, I used to have problems reading a 10-page article. By the time I reached page 10, I could not recall what the first page was about. Now with mind-mapping, I am making connections all the time, and the keywords help me remember and understand concepts better.

Despite my early huge struggle, I have achieved my goals and along the way, I managed to take many leadership roles which also improved my English. I could have made even greater academic progress if I had come for ELD help before my final year, but I was too busy and didn't realize that such good resources exist. My advice to all students is to start working on your ELD as soon as possible.

### **Starting point:**

Dominique wanted to be able to qualify for graduate school but was worried that her marks might not be high enough (especially since she struggled with low English proficiency in previous semesters). Her writing was limited in range and depth.

### **What she achieved:**

Dominique's fluency in expressing her thoughts got her 8/10 for most of her written assignments. Her lowest score in the course was a B. Her grades for that semester were the best she has had at university. As a successful candidate in the highly competitive Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET), Dominique will be an Assistant Language Teacher for English in Japan for a year. In her second year with JET, she will be a Coordinator in International Relations.

### **Key strategies:**

- Made time to improve her English despite her busy schedule
- Expanded active vocabulary through reading texts related to her courses
- Wrote daily emails to express her thoughts in relation to topics connected with her courses
- Used mind-mapping to take notes from reading (especially after becoming aware that she is a visual learner)
- Used keywords when writing assignments



## **Charting Your Own Success**

### **Learning from these seven students**

By getting onto positive spirals, these students have found that their language skills are no longer major obstacles to achieving success. Coursework and assignments take less time to do than they used to, and effort yields much better results. They know that they have reached the stage where further progress in English becomes easier, and all of them have set individual targets for further improvement. Meanwhile, they welcome this opportunity to share their experiences in order to help other students feel that they, too, can start their own action plans to better English language development.

### **Taking charge of your own development**

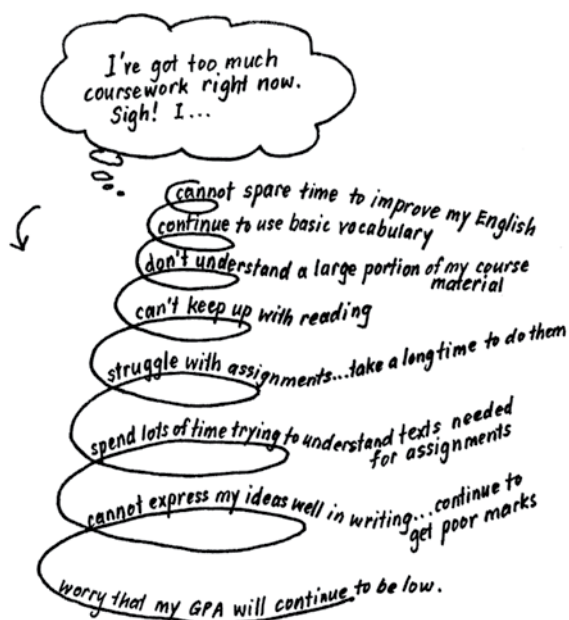
Like them, you can take charge of your own English language development by starting with small steps such as vocabulary expansion through reading and writing every day. Knowing your personal learning style, too, is an advantage to help you learn more effectively. For instance, if you are a visual learner, you might find it useful to use a mind-map to capture the relationships between different ideas within your readings. Some learning strategies are also better suited to some courses and academic disciplines, and being aware of different strategies helps you decide which strategies are best for you.

### **Starting Now**

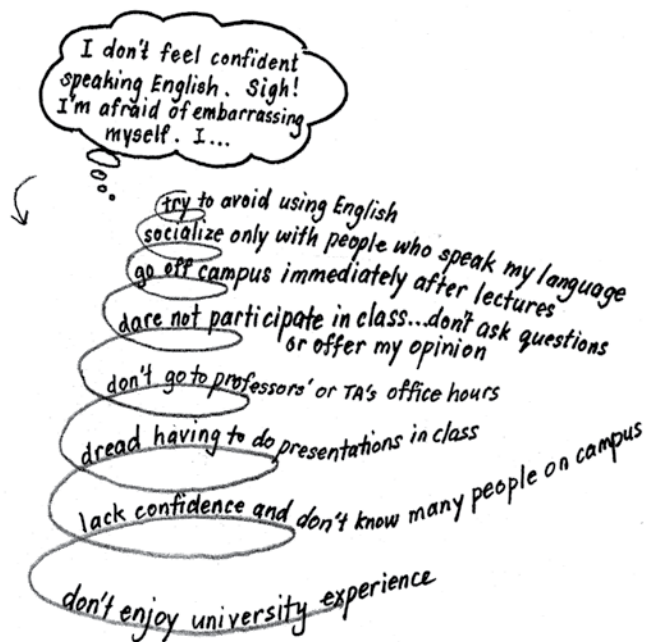
Identify what your strengths and weaknesses are right now. You can engage in English language development in almost everything you do, and everywhere you go. So, be proactive and start working on moving ahead.

# Which Spirals Are You On?

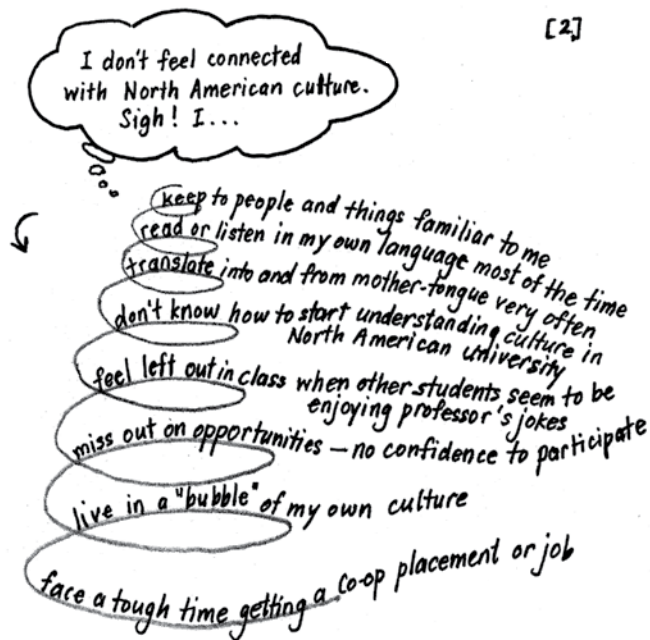
Circle the numbers below the relevant spirals that closely match your English language experience.



[1]



[2]



[3]

enjoy greater confidence and academic success

be able to write better assignments and exam question  
→ higher grades

be able to summarize, analyze & synthesize information  
better due to wider vocabulary

enjoy a deeper understanding of my course and  
research material

be able to read my course material more easily and  
think more critically

read faster and more extensively because I've  
better vocabulary

notice new words from my pleasure reading and  
try using them myself

I'll start investing some  
time to improve my English  
and do better academically. I'll...

[4]

know lots of classmates/profs/TA's; take leadership roles; enjoy my  
university experience

feel free to share my thoughts/ideas with others

attend office hours of profs/TA's to discuss topics I don't understand

be more confident to represent my group when reporting group discussion

ask questions during tutorials or Q&A session after a presentation

start speaking up in class

try using new words I've noticed from my reading or native speaker usage

speak English with my friends every day

I'll start investing some  
time to improve my oral  
communication skills. I'll...

[5]

take leadership in helping newer students from my culture enjoy their  
university experience

look for opportunities to participate in or learn from research projects  
in my department

interact with people from different cultures—small talk, serious discussion, etc.

participate in campus activities that provide opportunities to learn/experience  
Canadian culture

expand my horizon through magazines, newspapers, TV, radio, movies  
(all in English!)

form study groups with classmates from different cultures (so that  
all discussion take place in English)

actively ask questions so that I understand things I observe about Canadian  
ways of thinking and lifestyle

make friends with other students who have lived in Canada much longer

I'll make an effort to  
understand North American  
university culture. I'll

[6]

## Define Your Action Plan

Now that you've read the successes of others, and identified your spirals, you should start defining your own action plan so that you can achieve higher levels of competence in English language communication in an academic environment.

<p>Which spirals do you want to be on?</p> <p>Why is it important for you to be on these spirals?</p>	<p>Describe your ELD goals for this semester.</p>
<p>List strategies that will help you achieve your ELD goals:</p>	<p>Outline your plan for using these strategies including Writing Centre resources.</p>

**Note:** If you wish to begin a systematic program of English Language Development, and would like an ELD appointment, please complete the table above and bring it along to your first ELD appointment. During Week 1 of the semester, look out for an announcement posted at the Academic Learning Commons (AC 221) about how you can book your first ELD appointment.

## SUPPORT FOR ACADEMIC WRITING AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

As a student at the University of Toronto Scarborough, you have a great deal of support for academic writing and English language development from The Writing Centre. You can make use of these resources to help you develop your writing and other English language communication skills quickly the way these seven students did.

SUPPORT BEFORE BEGINNING FIRST SEMESTER	<b>ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT SUMMER LEARNING INSTITUTE</b> (offered during July and August). This highly-subsidized program is available only to students who have accepted the University of Toronto Scarborough offer. Registration for the limited places opens in June.				
SUPPORT WHEN YOU ARE IN UNIVERSITY	<b>WITHIN CREDIT COURSES</b>  Some courses like BGYA01 Introductory Biology have a special support called FSS (Foundation Skills for Scientists) which helps students with specific writing needs.  In other courses The Writing Centre specialists may present in-class seminars on writing your course assignments.	<b>OUTSIDE OF CREDIT COURSES</b>			
		<b>The Writing Centre</b> <b>one-on-one</b> tutorials help you become a better writer. Book your appointment online through the Intranet.	<b>The Writing Centre</b> <b>seminars</b> on writing-related topics in the first month of the semester help you understand requirements of various writing assignments. Register for these seminars online through your Intranet homepage.	<b>English Language Development</b> <b>one-on-one consultations</b> help you identify your problem areas and priorities, develop an action plan for improvement, and offer you the opportunity to participate in the <b>RWE</b> program. Book your appointment online through the Intranet or send an email request to the ELD Coordinator	<b>Communication Café</b> provides you with an enjoyable and risk-free environment to improve your oral communication skills for academic purposes. Register for your weekly session through your Intranet homepage.

## Conclusion

These seven students, and many others, have beaten the odds and developed their English language skills sufficiently to meet their academic needs. They have shown that starting with English as a second language need not be an impediment to success. And they have done so within a short time. So can you!

If you are not already on a positive spiral, it is important that you start moving onto one as soon as possible. You must sincerely want to commit to a systematic plan of English language development. The sooner you start investing effort, the sooner you will enjoy better grades and be able to take up opportunities for a more enjoyable and meaningful university experience.

## Pedagogic Perspective

Given that academic acculturation is paramount to student success (e.g. Ballard, 1996; Todd, 1997), that the demands of academic communication are multi-dimensional, and that diversity in our student population is increasing, conventional methods of supporting students in addressing their language- and culture-related challenges need to be supplemented by innovative approaches. Appropriate scaffolding and guidance can empower individual students to become autonomous learners (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2001). The examples presented here demonstrate how strategic support enables students to develop the cognitive, affective and social resources that in turn expand their capacity to meet academic challenges and achieve their academic goals.

Threats and opportunities go hand in hand. By helping students address prominent threats, and achieve tangible successes, students become very motivated and are able to sustain their efforts. Developing learner autonomy by focussing students on overcoming major areas of individual challenges has helped these seven students turn threats into opportunities.

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