Improving English with Extensive Input

Translated by ChatGPT.

In 2014, when I encountered programming problems, I would search for English web pages on Google. However, I found it difficult to continue because I read slowly and frequently needed to refer to a dictionary. I felt lost in the clouds and decided to turn to Chinese web pages instead. At that time, I preferred reading in Chinese whenever possible. However, over the past six years, my approach has reversed, and I now only read content in Chinese when it is not available in English. I spend my leisure time in the English-speaking world, watching American TV shows without subtitles and browsing TikTok videos. Despite my efforts, my English proficiency is still not as good as my Chinese, maybe only half as good.

Regarding the question of "How to learn English to the level of a native speaker" I believe I have found the answer. Over the last two years, my English proficiency has steadily improved, especially during the second half of 2019. Looking back, I realize that if I had put in the same effort in 2015-2016, my English proficiency might be as good as it is today. With time and work, I can now use English resources to solve many of the problems I had given up on before. This progress allows me to read more professional books and broadens my horizons. In the internet age, I have come to realize that we can simulate living in English-speaking countries without leaving our homes. People in English-speaking countries are similar to us; they spend most of their time on phones and computers, surfing the internet. Once we learn how to access the internet freely, we can enter their world too.

I am sharing these insights and experiences as if I am speaking to my younger self, to high school and college students today, and to anyone interested in learning English on their own. In my previous article on "The Journey of Learning English," I discussed my experiences in learning English over the years. Here, I want to add some recent reflections.

Just like with any other subject, the most important thing is finding a method that you enjoy and sticking with it. If you love English songs, start by learning their lyrics, word by word, understanding their meanings. Then, listen to the songs and write down the lyrics with a pen or on your computer. If that seems challenging, that's okay; move on to learning another song. Learn many songs, maybe a hundred of your favorites. Believe me, when you have learned a hundred songs, your brain will be different. You'll find that you can understand similar lyrics and songs much easier. To continue improving your English to a native-like level, learn another hundred songs, but this time, switch to different topics and genres, from love songs to country music.

If you enjoy quotes, find a hundred inspiring quotes, especially from people you admire. Learn them one by one, look up words in the dictionary, and understand their meanings. If you admire certain foreign personalities, follow them on Twitter, read their tweets one by one, and look up unfamiliar words. If you like

playing games and also want to learn English, try playing English-language games. Find a hundred games to play. If you love watching American TV shows, try watching them without subtitles. Initially, it might be challenging to understand, but as you continue watching, you'll gradually notice that you can understand more. If watching without subtitles is too difficult, try using English subtitles. Platforms like Netflix and YouTube offer subtitle options easily. After watching a hundred episodes of TV shows or documentaries, you'll realize that your English listening skills have improved significantly. If you continue this for a couple of months, you'll find that you can't go back to your previous level. Language learning is fascinating; once you understand something, you won't forget it.

Currently, in my day-to-day life as a freelancer, I spend a significant amount of time improving my English. I read a couple of chapters on Kindle, browse TikTok for short videos, watch TV shows and documentaries on Netflix, and explore various content on YouTube. I do whatever interests me at the moment. My only requirement for myself is that since I'm choosing content I enjoy, I should focus and understand every sentence carefully.

Here are some statistics: I've watched tens of thousands of TikTok videos, liked around ten thousand of them. I've watched a hundred documentaries and movies on Netflix. I've read over a hundred English blog articles. I've read 15 English books. Achieving this progress took time and concentration, mainly during the second half of 2019. On average, I spent around eight hours per day, five days a week. My main focus was on improving my listening and reading skills.

I believe it's essential not to force yourself to learn. Persistence can be painful. Find the content and methods that you enjoy the most, and stick with them. Watching international TikTok videos is effortless and doesn't require persistence. If you find certain materials difficult, look for easier ones to learn from. Once you've mastered the easy ones, move on to slightly more challenging content. Language is omnipresent, and there's an abundance of topics and expressions to explore.

To make progress, reflect on how you learned Chinese. It wasn't by studying grammar and doing exercises; you watched many martial arts movies and TV shows before coming to school. You engaged in simple conversations with your parents before starting school. Similarly, learning English should be approached in the same way.

Back in high school, even after learning English, our listening and reading skills were still poor. In exam-oriented learning, we might not have been efficient in our studies. Apart from exams, did we take the initiative to learn on our own? Probably not. In the past, learning resources were limited, with only textbooks and exercises like "New Concept English" and language learning tapes. In elementary school, we only occasionally listened to audio tapes in class. In middle school, we had around 15 minutes of listening practice before evening self-study.

Despite the hassle of accessing the internet, we now have abundant resources available for self-learning. The

internet provides us with ample material for learning English.

Learning anything might be similar to learning English. Believe in the power of time and allow yourself to indulge in the simplest knowledge. If you want to learn physics, start with a series of basic physics experiments. If you want to learn programming, start with graphical programming. If you want to improve your drawing skills, start by drawing simple things. Turn learning into a game; even studying English with TikTok is genuinely fun and addictive.

When it becomes a game, our focus is intensified, and thinking becomes enjoyable. If you find yourself struggling to understand, search for easier materials to read. Read English children's books and watch animated films for children; they are excellent resources.

We should consider how we encourage high school and college students and those interested in learning English. After sharing these insights, I want to end with a memorable and slightly exaggerated statement: Learning English like a native is genuinely simple and enjoyable.