

Guide to Improving Your English

Introduction

The language practice team at the University of Duisburg-Essen has put together this guide to help you improve your English language skills. While it is aimed primarily at students who have deficits they need to overcome, the tips can be used by anyone, as your English can always become even better.

Before we go on to the specific tips, there are some misconceptions about studying English that we would like to dispel. Therefore, we will talk about them briefly before going on to the tips.

First of all, you may be asking yourself why (or even if) you need to get better. After all, you have been admitted into the Anglophone Studies program and can begin to study your subject. While this may be true, there are other hurdles still facing you. If you are an LA (BA) student, you need to score at least 50% on the assessment test before you can take your first language exam. If you score less than 50%, you have to retake the test in a future semester, and waiting to take the test can delay the completion of your studies.

You may also be asking yourself to what degree your result reflects your abilities. Perhaps you received good grades in school, and now you have not performed as well as expected on the assessment test. Well, the test has not been put together by mean-spirited instructors to make you feel stupid. Nor is it an evaluation of your worth as a person. It is a diagnostic test that indicates where your strengths and deficits lie. If, for example, you have difficulty with tenses in English, then this is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. You will need this knowledge if you wish to pass exams and write term papers in English, and of course later on, most obviously if you plan to work as an English teacher.

Perhaps some of you are now thinking, "I'm enrolled in a double-major BA or the Kulturwirt degree program, so there is no minimum test score I have to get, and I will never be a teacher." Well, your test score is still important. A low score on the test is a warning sign that you need to improve if you want to complete your studies with success. And if you want to use your knowledge in a professional context, you will need to speak English fluently.

Furthermore, if you are having problems with English, then studying this subject is much more difficult and frustrating. And why would you study something you are not good at and don't enjoy? No one would say, "Well, I'm not very good at numbers, but I'm going to study math. It'll work out." The same applies to studying English. If you are not good at it, you basically have two choices. Either study something else or get better. We have written this guide to help you improve, but you will need to do the necessary work yourself. Learning is an active process that everyone has to do for him/herself. The rest of us can only motivate and support the learner.

This brings us to the next point: if you are weak at English, you will not improve unless you put a considerable amount of work into achieving this goal. There is no instant solution. You will not wake up one morning and suddenly be able to speak fluent English. Nor will English miraculously appear in your head once you have your English degree in hand. You will need to work at it, regularly and over an extended period of time. In fact, if you intend to become a teacher or use English professionally in some form in the future, you will need to spend the rest of your (working) life maintaining and improving your language skills. Doing a couple of grammar exercises or writing one essay, regardless of how awesome it may be, will not put you on the level of a native speaker. To be honest, nothing probably will, as native-like language ability generally requires exposure and learning almost from birth, but that doesn't mean you can't realistically become an extremely proficient user of the language (and an excellent role model for your own pupils later). Learning English is no different from going to the gym. A single workout will not give you the strength or endurance of an Olympic athlete. Improvement takes time and effort.

Many new students think that studying English at university will be no different from learning it at school. Participating in class and doing the assignments will be enough to get better and be successful. But there are indeed important differences. At school, the pace is slower, and you have more contact hours with your teachers to practice what you have been taught in class. In contrast, the typical university course is 90 minutes per week and serves to introduce new material to you. But you must learn this material and how to apply it on your own. This is the independent learning expected and required of university students.

This style of learning is challenging enough for students who can speak fluent English. It is even more difficult for students whose English is at a basic level. If you are such a student, simply attending courses and going through the weekly readings and assignments will not be sufficient to overcome your deficits. Instead, you will have to do extra work. What kind of extra work? Well, it depends on what your deficits are, and this is where this guide comes in. It will give you tips for the following areas:

grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

If you follow these tips, you can and will progress. But keep in mind that improvement, especially if you are at a level considerably below where you need to be, takes time and effort. There is no magic pill or kindly wizard with a magic wand.

Grammar

If you are like most students who have gone through the German education system, you probably last did grammar in middle school. This is quite some time ago, and your skills may be rusty, especially if you never learned the grammar properly in the first place. As a teacher, though, you will need to know English grammar inside out and "in your sleep". If you don't, how can you teach it to your students? And don't expect that you will always be a

step ahead of them. Some of them may be fluent in English, and if they decide to point out your mistakes in front of the class, that can destroy your authority as a teacher.

And those of you who are not studying to become an English teacher need to know grammar too. If you are working at a company and the boss or your colleagues know that you have an English degree, they will come to you with “English tasks” such as communicating with English-speaking clients, writing business letters, composing brochures in English, or translating complex texts. For such tasks, it is important that your English is correct. You are representing the company and need to demonstrate competence and professionalism.

If grammar is an area that you need to work on, we recommend that you get a grammar book with exercises and keys (!). Go through the units and do the exercises, then check your answers. Ideally, you should try to set aside/reserve a minimum amount of time each week for such work and stick to your plan. You’ll get a great deal more out of it if you do say a couple of hours regularly every week, than if you spend 10 hours on such exercises one weekend and then do nothing for the next few weeks. If you have difficulty with any of the concepts or exercises, ask one of the language instructors in our department for help. They will be happy that you are taking the initiative to improve your knowledge and can assist you.

There are many grammar books on the market, but here are a few suggestions for you:

A standard grammar that is used by many students is:

English Grammar in Use by Raymond Murphy. Published by Cambridge University Press
ISBN 978-3-12-535424-1

Make sure you get the edition with the answers at the back.

There is also a book with additional exercises:

English Grammar in Use Supplementary Exercises by Louise Hashemi with Raymond Murphy.
Published by Cambridge University Press.

ISBN 978-3125354265

Advanced Grammar in Use by Martin Hewings. Published by Cambridge University Press.
ISBN 978-1107697386

This book is organized the same way as the one by Raymond Murphy, but at a more advanced level. As a matter of fact, this is the grammar book that we recommend for all students taking Comprehensive Language Course I. Again, make sure you get the edition with the answers at the back.

A Practical English Grammar by A.J. Thomson and A.V. Martinet. Published by Oxford University Press.

ISBN 978-0194313421

This is another standard grammar book for learners of English. It does not have exercises in it, but there are two supplementary books of exercises with keys. These are out of print, but can be purchased used:

A Practical English Grammar Exercises 1 by A.J. Thomson and A.V. Martinet. Published by Oxford University Press.

ISBN 978-0194313438

A Practical English Grammar Exercises 2 by A.J. Thomson and A.V. Martinet. Published by Oxford University Press.

ISBN 978-0194313445

Exploring English Grammar by Geoff Sammon. Published by Cornelsen.

ISBN 78-3464371312

This is another reference grammar with exercises and a key. It has been written for a German audience and explains grammatical concepts clearly.

The following book takes an error analysis approach. It analyzes English mistakes commonly made by speakers whose native language is German:

The Mistakes Clinic by Geoff Parkes. Published by Englang Books. Available through the Englang website (there are several books listed on this page, *The Mistakes Clinic* is farther down the page):

<https://englangbooks.co.uk/efl/>

The book has 300 sentences with different kinds of mistakes for you to correct. Includes answer keys and detailed explanations.

And on a lighter note, we have one last recommendation for you:

Have You Eaten Grandma? by Gyles Brandreth. Published by Penguin Books.

ISBN 978-1405945080

This book takes a humorous but nevertheless very informative look at a number of areas of English, including proper punctuation, spelling, grammar, and usage.

Vocabulary

The English language is rich in synonyms and words that almost mean the same thing, but not quite. The more vocabulary you know, the better your English will be. You will be able to express yourself fluently both in speaking and writing, and you will understand written and spoken English more easily. But learning vocabulary can be **tedious**. If you just quickly Google a word, you won't **retain** it, nor will you learn how to use it properly in context. You need to use a good, **reputable** dictionary, and use the words you have just learned.

An excellent interactive vocabulary website is <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/>

This website allows you to set up word banks and do vocabulary quizzes. It also has lovely, funny definitions and examples, and tells little anecdotes to help you remember the vocabulary.

Try it now. Look up **'tedious'**, **'retain'**, and **'reputable'**.

Here are some other, more conventional, online dictionaries that provide example sentences, nuanced definitions, and pronunciation:

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/>

<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-german> (bilingual)

<https://en.pons.com/translate>

<https://www.oed.com/> (available through your university VPN)

If you still remember your alphabet, good old-fashioned paper dictionaries are also a lot of fun, particularly because you can just browse them and stumble across words you weren't looking for.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary is probably the best known. It is published by Oxford University Press.

ISBN 978-0194798594

(There is also a version available with an online access code for further materials. The ISBN number is for the version without the code.)

Another dictionary that is very useful is a collocations dictionary. It tells you which words are used together with other ones. Here is one that we recommend:

The Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English. Published by Oxford University Press

ISBN: 978-0194325387

On that note, Oxford University Press also has a dictionary of phrasal verbs:

The Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary for Learners of English

ISBN: 978-0194317214

And one of idioms:

The Oxford Idioms Dictionary for Learners of English

ISBN: 978-0194317238

Don't panic. We are not telling you to go out and buy all these dictionaries, but they are helpful when it comes to learning vocabulary and you should be aware of them.

If you are the type of student who likes more regimented learning resources – and there is nothing wrong with that -, we strongly recommend the following vocabulary trainer:

English Vocabulary in Use - Advanced by Michael McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell. Published by Cambridge University Press

ISBN 978-3125410244

This book provides topical word lists and vocabulary exercises.

There is also an upper-intermediate edition available:

English Vocabulary in Use – Upper-intermediate by Michael McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell.

Published by Cambridge University Press

ISBN 978-1316631751

Don't be over ambitious. You will soon give up if you try to learn too many words in one day, so be realistic. When you come across a new word, note it down. This will help you to remember it, particularly if you write it by hand. Put it in a journal, make up sentences, write little stories, song-texts etc.

Beyond using trainers like the ones above, you should keep your eyes open for new vocabulary whenever you read or listen to English. Write down new words in a notebook. When you do this, also note the context and the collocations/constructions. Is it used in a positive or negative context? Does the word require a preposition before or after it? A particular tense?

Review the words in your notebook regularly. Pick out some of them and try to incorporate them in your spoken or written English (but keep in mind the context – don't try to force them into situations that are not relevant or appropriate). Write a text using these words. Your text can be about anything, for example a story, poem, or a factual report, perhaps even a diary entry (more about diaries and journals later). If you want, you can make flashcards with the words on one side and the definitions on the other to test yourself. Play with language and enjoy it.

(And remember that 'vocabulary' is always singular!)

Listening

Today, developing your English listening skills is easier than ever before. There are countless audio sources which allow you to listen to native speakers of English. Here are just a few:

Films and TV Series

Back in the old days, access to English-language shows and movies was limited to what happened to be playing in the theaters/theatres or on TV. Now there are thousands of movies and TV shows to choose from on DVD and streaming services. You can choose the soundtrack and add the subtitles if you wish. You can also stop and replay a passage that you didn't catch or understand. DVDs are quite inexpensive and many of you probably already have subscriptions to streaming services, but if you are on a really tight budget, you can go to your local public library and borrow them for free.

Podcasts

There are literally hundreds of thousands of podcasts available, on nearly any subject, and usually for free. You can access them through a program like iTunes (or its successor, Podcasts), Google Podcasts, or Spotify, or you can simply use a search machine, typing in your search terms. If you are not sure what to look for, type in something like "best podcasts of this year" or type in something you're interested in together with the word "podcast." They don't have to be podcasts about learning English, although there is no scarcity of those. You can stream podcasts or download them onto your smartphone and listen to them any time you have a spare moment.

Just one example of a podcast for English learners is *All Ears English*, which has over a thousand podcasts about all things language related. The hosts also produce an IELTS preparation podcast. These podcasts are free. If you want, you can also order transcripts, but they cost money. Here is the link to the *All Ears English* podcast:

<https://www.allearsenglish.com/general-fluency/>

The BBC has an excellent website for English learners including not only podcasts but learning activities as well. The site also has resources for teachers. Furthermore, the BBC is on Instagram and Twitter so you can learn English via social media.

Here is the link. It is well worth checking out:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/>

National Public Radio (NPR) has many podcasts to listen to, covering topics such as news, comedy, pop culture and storytelling:

<https://www.npr.org/programs/>

These are just three examples of sites to go to. As mentioned above, there are literally thousands of podcasts for you to listen to.

In addition to listening to specific podcasts, you might also try listening to English language radio. For British English, Radio 4 is highly recommended. You can listen to it, for example, on the BBC Sounds website:

https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/live:bbc_radio_fourfm

While you can always listen to podcasts for information and entertainment, you can go a step further and use them specifically to test your listening comprehension. Listen for the content, perhaps taking notes. Then summarize the main points of the podcast. You can do this in writing, as a speaking activity or even as a silent mental activity inside your head. Then listen to the podcast again to check and see if you remembered all the important points correctly.

In addition to listening for content, also try to listen for language. Are there any idiomatic expressions that the speakers use? What about collocations? Think about the verb tenses that the speakers chose. Are they different from the ones you would have chosen or that are used in German (or whatever your native language is)? Are there any signal words or other reasons that explain why the speakers chose the ones they did?

Here too, you can keep a language notebook in which you can write down new words or phrases. Try to use them when you speak or write English.

In general, you should make it a habit to not just passively “consume” such content, but actively work on listening to (and analysing) it.

Reading

Read regularly in English, beyond what you are asked to read for your classes. You can focus on novels, short stories or non-fiction, but if you want to learn about a wide range of topics and their associated vocabulary, reading newspaper articles is an even better way to go. And newspaper articles are short, so you can get through them quickly. Here too, the internet offers you a wealth of resources. While many online newspapers have a paywall, there are others that are (still) free:

Here is just a sampling of the free ones:

CNN

www.cnn.com

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/international>

The Independent

<https://www.independent.co.uk/>

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)
(With podcasts and live streams)

<https://www.cbc.ca/>

Vox

<https://www.vox.com/>

National Public Radio (NPR)
(With lots of podcasts too – see above)

<https://www.npr.org/>

Websites like the Washington Post and New York Times allow you to read a limited number of articles per month for free, but also offer digital subscription at reasonable rates (currently about €30,- per year).

The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/>

The Washington Post

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/>

One newspaper that is very useful for both English learners and English teachers is *World and Press*. This newspaper is actually a collection of articles from English-language newspapers, primarily from the U.K. and the United States, but also from other English-speaking countries including Canada, Australia, and India. The articles cover a wide range of political and cultural topics that offer interesting insights into these countries. Below each article is a list of difficult words with their German translations, so you do not need a dictionary. That is why they are a favourite of teachers at German schools. The paper is published twice a month, with double editions at Christmas and in the summer. You can buy single copies at newsagents that sell international papers (e.g. at train stations) or you can subscribe. Here is the link to the publisher:

<https://www.sprachzeitungen.de/englisch/world-and-press.html>

When you read, you should not only be doing so to understand the content, but also to learn about the language. Look at how vocabulary, grammar and syntax are used in the texts. What is different from your native language? Note down interesting and useful expressions. Remember, once you are a teacher, you will have to explain such things to your pupils, so you should already be thinking about them when you read something in English.

Speaking

Take advantage of opportunities to speak English whenever they arise. Don't worry about making mistakes; the more you practice, the better you will become.

Participate in class discussions at university. Here you can practice using the specialized vocabulary you learn in your courses.

Meet up with other English students for coffee, a meal or an English movie and talk in English, at least for some of the time you are together. If you can, try to do this regularly.

Again, don't worry about making mistakes. If you are always afraid to speak, you will never improve. And you can also ask your language partners to (politely) correct your mistakes and do the same for them (just don't go overboard. No one likes a nitpicker).

Find a tandem language partner. Believe it or not, there are native-English students at the university. Some are exchange students while others are taking their entire degrees here. They are often interested in improving their German or learning another language. You and your tandem partner can practice speaking your native languages with each other and at the same time meet new people.

The UDE has a website to facilitate meetings between potential tandem partners:

<https://www.uni-due.de/sprachtandem>

The University of Bochum has a program as well:

<https://www.hochschule-bochum.de/die-bo/wichtige-einrichtungen/international-office/angebote-io/sprachtandem/>

In the past, the English department's Fachschaft organized pub crawls and other social activities. And just because it is called a pub crawl doesn't mean that you need to drink alcohol; you can have non-alcoholic drinks and still take part in order to meet people and speak English. Contact the Fachschaft to see what they have planned for this semester. Here is the link to their website:

<https://www.uni-due.de/fachschaft1a/anglistik.php>

If you are interested in theater and acting, our university has its own English-language drama group: DUET (Duisburg University English Thespians). This group has been around since the early 1980's and has staged a play at the end of nearly every winter semester (Covid permitting). Its members include both native and non-native speakers from all over the world, and new additions to the team are always welcome. And should you be hesitant about appearing on stage in front of a live audience, you can still help with lighting, costumes, stage props, etc. DUET is based on the Duisburg campus. Here is a link to the website:

<https://www.uni-due.de/duet/index.html>

Writing

As with speaking, the more you practice writing, the better you will become. Again, take advantage of the opportunities that are offered to you. For example, do the written assignments (in English, of course!) that your instructors ask you to do, even if they are optional. Just because they are optional does not mean that they are unimportant or unnecessary. These assignments are an excellent opportunity to practice your academic English and receive feedback on your writing. Unfortunately, many weaker students do not hand in optional assignments, even though they are the ones who need this practice the

most. They don't have the time, or they find expressing their ideas in English to be too hard. But if students don't practice writing, how can they expect to get better?

Here the experience of one of our former students comes to mind. Her story serves as an excellent example of what diligence and motivation can achieve. She needed to improve her English, but family commitments prevented her from going abroad for a semester. Nevertheless, she knew that she needed to improve her language skills. So she wrote an essay every week for a year and a half, handing them in to one of the language instructors and getting feedback on her work. She graduated from the department and went on to receive a Ph.D. After she had graduated, she came back for a visit and said how everyone at her place of work was impressed by her excellent English. Practice does make perfect.

Writing does not have to be done within the context of the university; you can practice writing on your own. Keep a journal or diary and write down your thoughts and experiences. You do not have to write much, but you should get into the habit of writing regularly, every day, if possible. It may seem difficult at first, but again, the more you practice, the more fluent you will become.

Another option is to write a blog. As blogs can be written about anything and everything, choosing a topic that interests you will motivate you to write regularly. Furthermore, you can determine who has access to your blog, so it can be for your eyes only, a small group of friends, or anyone who shares your interests. You can even write it together with other fellow language learners who also wish to practice their writing. It is completely up to you. There are numerous different blog services available for free. Here are links to two of them:

Blogger

<https://www.blogger.com/about/?bpli=1>

Wordpress

<https://wordpress.com/de/>

While we are on the topic of sharing your writing, we would like to mention two more options:

If you like fanfiction, there are many sites where you can upload your stories. New material is always welcome. And don't let yourself be intimidated by the other authors. Many of them are non-native speakers whose English is not perfect either.

Alternatively, you may consider submitting your work to a literary journal. Our Anglophone Studies Department has its own journal of student writing – *Diamonds in the Rough*. Go to their site and check out the past issues to see what other students have written. Here is the link: <http://diamondsintheroughmagazine.com/>

The more you write, the better and more confident you will become.

Finally, one word about learning languages online. There are many such services available, some of which are free (at least in their basic versions) and others which are only available in exchange for payment. We wouldn't recommend exclusively using such a platform to learn or improve your language skills, but they can be a useful and even fun complement, so you might like to try one or more of the following:

<https://www.duolingo.com/>

<https://www.memrise.com/>

<https://www.babbel.com/>

etc.

Well, you have now reached the end of this guide. We hope that it helps you to improve your English. And don't be discouraged if your progress is not as fast as you would like it to be. As the English saying goes: *Rome wasn't built in a day*. But don't let that dishearten you or put you off. Remember that the sooner you start to work on your English, the sooner you will get better.