

How To Learn English: Passive Learning

Many of us—myself included—think that, when you want to learn something, the thing to do is get busy. We start making flashcards, we download the eWorksheets and we start looking for someone to talk to in English.

Sometimes, the hardest thing you can do to learn English is to just do nothing.

I don't mean do *nothing at all*. Obviously, that's not a strategy. I know, because for years I did nothing about my plan to learn French and it never helped. I mean, to find every chance you can to expose yourself to English, but to only listen and talk the best you can, without worrying about everything else.

The idea of 'not worrying' or 'not caring' about your grammar, about whether you're using the right word. Or about whether you've understood everything exactly the way that it's meant can be disorienting. A lot of English lessons—and English *tests*—are about focusing on the details. It can be hard to let that focus go.

Passive Learning

We call this “passive learning.” 'Passive' is the opposite of 'active.' It means you learn without trying to. After years and years of working hard to learn in school and private lessons, the idea might sound crazy, but it's the way you learn new things all the time.

Whatever your native language is, you didn't need to spend a lot of time learning grammar and vocabulary. (Though some of us work on learning vocabulary, because we think it makes us sound smarter.) You just pick up words and learn what 'sounds right' or 'sounds funny' by talking—*a lot*—with your native language.

Some people believe that you lose this ability or skill when you get older. But that's not true at all. I can see it in how quickly my mother learned to use computer vocabulary after she turned sixty. And I can see it in myself: I don't work on my German anymore, but people often tell me that it's getting better.

The simple fact is this: the more chances your brain has to process English, the better it will understand English and how to use it. And you can do this without even really trying, that's the great thing.

Today, we're going to talk about some—but not *all*—of the many ways you can do this with English.

Use English For A Hobby

One of the great things about English is that it's spoken by a lot of people. **No matter what you're interested in from cars to computers, wine to women, you'll be able to find information on your favorite subjects in English.** And, maybe even a lot of the specialized vocabulary is the same, who knows?

The trick is this: start looking for resources on the Internet or in your local library in English on your favorite topics. If you like model railroads, you'll find many model railroading web pages in English.

Start using English to learn more about the things you're interested in and two things will happen: you'll learn more about your favorite topics and you'll learn more English. Maybe you will have to work a little bit on the vocabulary, but you'll find yourself 'magically' thinking that some grammar 'sounds right' and other grammar doesn't. That's your brain passively learning English.

Use Your DVD Library

If you're like my students, you have more DVDs from Hollywood than I do. And each of those DVDs includes the option of watching the DVD in English. You might think the idea is too hard, after all, they will be speaking pretty fast English but there's something important to remember: you already know what they are saying!

I don't know about you, but in my DVD collection there are DVDs I have only watched one time. . . and there's another DVD—The Princess Bride—that I have watched fifteen of maybe twenty-five times. I like that movie, and I can speak along with the actors in my favorite parts. I know the movie so well that, if I change the sound to Spanish—and I speak *no* Spanish—I can still watch the movie.

Pick the movies that you *really* know and watch them in English—maybe with English subtitles—and you'll be surprised at how quickly you forget that you're watching in English! After all, you probably *understand* a lot more English than you think.

You don't have to do this all the time: do it when you feel like it. Or maybe when it's raining outside and you don't know what else to do. It's fun and can be a great way to feel better about your English. As an English teacher I won't tell you that drinking alcohol helps you learn English, but a glass or three of red wine—or your favorite drink—can help you relax into not trying to 'actively' learn English.

Don't Forget Your Music, Either

A lot of music comes from the U.S. and the U.K. Maybe you even like some of it, whether you understand what they're singing or not. My advice: make a CD of the songs you think are easiest to

understand and then start learning the lyrics. ('Lyrics' is the term for the 'words' of a song.)

You can find the lyrics to almost any song in the Internet. Try these sites, for starters:

- **lyrics.com** – claims to be the biggest site of it's kind on the Internet
- **azlyrics.com** – another lyrics site

Once you have the lyrics to your favorite songs, the trick is to read through them and try to learn the vocabulary you don't know. Once you've started learning the vocabulary, you don't need to make flashcards or even to write the words in your vocabulary journal. You can use the CD to practice the words!

When you play the CD you can try to focus on understanding what the artist is singing, or you can just enjoy your favorite songs in the background. Either way, you'll find yourself learning more than you expect!

In Conclusion

You have luck. You're learning English, not ancient Sumarian (that's a really old language, that I don't think anyone uses now). That means that there is no limit to the ways that you can expose yourself to English. The trick is finding what works for you—what do you do *for fun* and not *to learn English*? Do that, and you'll find your English getting better, too.

What works for you? Is there anything you do in English for fun? Have you had success with this method? Or, if you try this, let me know how it works for you. I'm always interested in what works for you!