The Key To Improving English Proficiency

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The Open University of Hong Kong
Introductory Remarks

(1) There is more than one way to learn English.
(2) You have to find a way that suits your circumstances.
(3) I will tell you how I learned.
(4) You can decide whether this might also work for you.
What this talk will not do:

* It is not for those who want to pass an exam shortly

* The phonetics part may not be necessary for people who already have native level English proficiency
I can tell from people’s mistakes where the deficiency is.

These are the root problems:

(1) They never learned English phonetics
(2) They never learned English grammar
(3) They don’t understand English usage
People who don’t understand English phonetics often mis-pronounce these words:

claim, sales, chamber, debt, gross, business, facade
People who never learned English grammar would make these mistakes:

“Did you saw him struck?”
“Everybody have their reasons.”
People who don’t often use English as a working language will make these mistakes:

- “I am sorry I kicked you.”
- “You can have a fit upstairs.”
I was persuaded to do this talk
By Stephen Ng

I also saw the need to do something
when this happened at a Band One secondary school:

The teacher told his students, “My nam is Mr. Chan.”
Three possibilities:

He didn’t learn English phonetics.
His hearing is not good.
He is linguistically lazy.

Maybe all of the above?
Chinese people have good visual memory and a good sense of logic. But our audio faculty is not as good.

Our innate strengths help us excel in arithmetic, but cannot help us in learning a foreign language.
Chinese characters are ideograms or a sophisticated form of picture-writing. They are more logical and easier to remember than English words.

Just look at the following and compare.
1 2 3
One Two Three
First Second Third
Eleven Twelve Thirteen

一 二 三
第一 第二 第三
十一 十二 十三
English words are not ideograms. They have nothing to do with picture-writing and you will not find the same logic there.

To learn English well, you have to master the sounds. You cannot learn English by simply using your eyes.
How the brain works

- Common Integrative Area
- Broca's Speech Area
- Primary Auditory Area
- Auditory Association Area
- Visual Association Area
- Primary Visual Area
腦袋的功能

綜合區
主要視覺皮層
布洛卡氏區
主要聽覺皮層
聽覺聯合區
視覺聯合區
How a baby learns a language

*Sounds come before visuals.*
*We use our ears to listen (to the sounds).*
*We use our mouths to talk (to reproduce the sounds).*

*Then we use our eyes & we see the written words, & we make the connection between the sounds & the words.*

*We use our hands to write, to reproduce the written words.*
The important thing is “Integration”

You have to press “Save”!!!
“Read” has the following meanings here:

(1) Read with your eyes as in “read a book”;  
(2) Read with your mouth as in “read a speech out loud”;  
(3) Read as in the question “Do you read?” – which can mean “Do you understand?”
If you can read & write, all these areas of the brain are functioning properly:

Auditory area  
Visual area  
Broca’s area  
Integration area 

Add to these the use of your hand to reproduce the words & the integration is complete.
Children could speak before they could write.

At some point, they learn to connect the spoken sound (audio) with the written word (visual).
The fastest way to learn a language –

Exercise (1) the audio area,
(2) the Broca’s area,
(3) the visual area, &
(4) the hands

This will hurry on the integration!
Because they have to use all four areas of the brain in an English saturated environment, local students who have studied in the US, UK, Canada & Australia are generally more proficient in English.

Where they may not be so proficient is in written English. They make grammatical mistakes.
So how do most of us learn English?

We are introduced to the spoken word and the written word at the same time, and the eyes are so powerful that we tend to learn English through our eyes and neglect our ears and our mouths.

This is not a good way.
How often do you use English? (listen to English, speak English, read/write English)

(1) At home
(2) At work
(3) On social occasions
What is your answer?

Do you think a student in the US/UK/Canada/Australia will give more or less the same answer?

What about a student in Singapore/Malaysia/India?

And China?
Those people who use English as a working language

Those people who use English as a social language
Do you

*listen to English radio,
*watch English TV & English movies (DVDs with English subtitles),
*read English newspapers, magazines & books,
*read to yourself in English,
*engage in English conversation daily, and
*sing English songs?
A language mis-taught

最大的錯誤是「用眼睛去學英文」

*很少機會練習講英文

*不學文法，不明脈絡，沒有架構
Here’s the way to English proficiency

(1) Start with sounds & phonetics
(2) Then learn English grammar
(3) Learn English usage

Please note:
All three can take place at the same time. They also reinforce one another.
Without understanding English phonetics, this is what a lot of people do –

They try to recall the English sounds by marking English words with Chinese characters

Example: 陶善普審泰晤士內衣褲
“Too simple, sometimes naïve!”
Sometimes, this works (but only up to a point).

Examples: store, bus, taxi, bar, coffee

It doesn’t work for tram and ferry, or toast.
It is necessary to learn some basic English phonetics.

But it is not necessary to learn IPA.
(Apologies to the academics who teach the M.A. in Linguistics)
You know there are 26 letters in the English alphabet

Of these, you know a e i o u y
form the vowels (and the diphthongs)

The rest are called consonants
What you must learn next is that the vowels can produce more than one sound.

Look at the following examples: bay, bad, bar

When your teacher reads these words out loud, you know that “a” sounds different in each of the words.
You then need to find a way to differentiate the sounds.

The way *The American Heritage Dictionary* does it is to use very simple symbols, like this:

bāy  bǎd  bär  bâre

I call these 第一音 第二音 第三音 第四音.
Let’s just take the most used ones:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>第一音</th>
<th>第二音</th>
<th>第三音</th>
<th>第四音</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bāy</td>
<td>băd</td>
<td>băr</td>
<td>bâre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bēe</td>
<td>bĕd</td>
<td></td>
<td>bêrth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bīte</td>
<td>bĭt</td>
<td></td>
<td>bîrth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bōld</td>
<td>bŏg</td>
<td>böre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blūe</td>
<td>bŭd</td>
<td></td>
<td>bûrst</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*If this is still too difficult, here’s a simple way to help you remember some of the sounds. You know these names:

A  Faye  Jacky  Anita
E  Eason  Leslie  Cherie
I  Heidi  Gigi
O  Joey  Gloria
U  Daniel Wu
Faye

Jacky

Anita
Joey

Gloria

ō

ö
Daniel Wu

ū = oo

Ursula Andress

û ū
Can you tell the difference now?

Aim    Am
Amy    Tammy
Name

My name is Amy. It is the same as yours.
My nanny is Annie Tam.
After you have learned to use these 4 symbols, you should have no problem marking the pronunciation of these words:

Sam, amber, same, chamber, sales, claim

And you should know how to read these:

though, thought, through, thorough
Now you can try to use these symbols to mark the lyrics of a song

Anne Murray’s You Needed Me
I cried a tear
You wiped it dry
I was confused
You cleared my mind
I sold my soul
You bought it back for me
And held me up and gave me dignity
How do I know when to use the long “a” and when to use the short “a”?

There is a simple rule here. Look at the following and what do you notice?
ace, act, cape, cap, fate, fat, gate, gap, tape, tap
There are exceptions to the rule:

love, have, give

The thing to do is:

Know the rule, memorize the exceptions
The next thing you should learn is Stress
Chinese is a monosyllabic language, with almost equal stress on every word.

English is not monosyllabic; some English words are very long; they are polysyllabic.
Therefore, some syllables are stressed and some are not.

Until you learn where to place the stress, you will find these words difficult:

Manchester, politician, fluorescent, business
The tricky thing is that when these vowels are not stressed, they take on the same sound:

\[ a \ e \ i \ o \ u = i \]

Examples:
tentative, item, edible, robot, circus
(tentitive, itim, edible, robit, cirkis)
This is called the Schwa:

\[ \text{ә} \]

It is very important that you learn this. Until you do, you will not be speaking English properly.

How do you say this word? “Dymocks”
This is such a simple way of marking the pronunciation of English words that you should be able to learn it within a few weeks.

Afterwards, it’s just a question of putting it to use everyday.

The more you do this, the faster you learn.
I notice that many brands and shops have started using such symbols to show their customers the correct pronunciation of their brand names. Examples: *Esteē Lauder, Habitū, Alibī, Aēsop*

Hong Kong Land even used this word in an ad to promote their shopping space at the Landmark: *chic (shēk)*
In learning English pronunciation, there are two other things to bear in mind, aside from stress:

(1) Stress
(2) Consonant ending
(3) Intonation
Cantonese is monosyllabic.
And English is polysyllabic.
And so, they have a different intonation pattern.
Example:
香港政府今日宣報
The Government of Hong Kong announced today
Different intonations for –

Statement
Question
Command/Request
Learn to pronounce the consonant ending
Examples: almost, guests, rugged
Train your ears daily.
Learn from old Hollywood movies.

Train your speech organs daily.
Read an English passage aloud everyday.

Learn stress and intonation.
They also carry meaning.
I want you to leave.

I want you to leave.

I want you to leave.
You want to go, do you?
You don’t want to go, do you?
The objective is to be able to -

read every word
read a whole speech
carry on a conversation
The importance of grammar

If phonetics is the foundation, grammar is the superstructure
Your must learn the 8 Parts of Speech

Nouns
Pronouns
Adjectives
Prepositions
Verbs
Adverbs
Conjunctions & Interjections
Nouns in English and nouns in Chinese have almost a one to one correlation. There is no short cut here.

You must work hard to build up your vocabulary.
In spoken Chinese, pronouns can be problematic.
In learning adjectives, be aware that adjectives work together with nouns and pronouns.

Be aware of the 5 degrees of adjectives, not just 3.

Be aware that nouns can serve as adjectives.
Example: colour photographs

Be aware that verbs can serve as adjectives.
Example: a spoiled child
Prepositions are simple words.
But they are very specific.
And you have to learn them well.

They are always placed in front of the nouns (and the pronouns).
I gave the book *to* him.

I bought the book *for* him.

I put the book *on* the shelf.
In learning Verbs, you must understand the Tenses (There is no such clear distinction in Chinese.)

In learning Verbs, you must know that the Subject and the Verb have to agree.

You must know what is a Finite Verb & what is a Non-Finite Verb.
The barrister who said to the witness, “Did you saw him struck?” obviously had no understanding of something called “infinitive without to”.

The correct way to phrase that question is this: “Did you see him strike?”
Further examples

He helped me finish my homework.
I watched her get into the car.
She had him come over.
I saw him steal the bag.
We let them buy the drinks.
She made him do it.
Only learn the Subjunctive Mood after you have mastered all the Tenses.

(And then the Active Voice & Passive Voice.)

Only learn the Imperative Case after you have mastered the Tenses.

Only learn Reported Speech after you have mastered the Tenses.
The above three will confuse you if you do not have a firm grounding in the Tenses.
The Subjunctive Mood

If it rains, I will not go out.
If it rained, I would not go out.
If it had rained, I would not have gone out.

How would you translate these sentences?
What’s the difference between these sentences?

I don’t know.
I wouldn’t know.

It’s about time you go.
It’s about time you went.
Adverbs

Adverbs give additional meaning to the verbs.

Adverbs give additional meaning to the adjectives.

Adverbs give additional meaning to other adverbs.
Examples

He is moving slowly.
He is a very slow walker.
But now he is walking amazingly fast.
If your grammar is solid, you would not make these mistakes (lyrics often used in karaoke):

“The bright blessed day, the dark say good night.”
“And so to keep from telling her a lie, I just said sad movies made me cry.”
Usage

What is grammatically correct may not be idiomatic English

Example: “I am sorry I kicked you.”
“Oh, excuse me!”
Usage

Because of language interference, we tend to translate what we want to say from Chinese to English.

English: “After you.”
Cantonese: ?
Putonghua: ?
The following really would not do:

The ticket is produced. (Please take ticket.)
Please do not step into the gap. (Mind the gap!)
You can call me Jenny. (Please call me Jenny.)
Idiomatic English is often very simple:

*You are having me on.
*What is he after?
*You have to think it through.
*The numbers don’t add up.
*I can’t make him out.
How would you translate the following from Chinese to English?

活該
抵死
沒有大不了的胸

“No breast is too small for us”