

# How to Improve Your Spoken English

Advice for Struggling Students



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## INTRODUCTION

Every college student in China seems to be studying English. I see them listening to radio programs on their dormitory bed, studying the dictionary in the back of the classroom, and completing grammar exercises in the cafeteria. But still, these same students come to me and ask the same question: “Teacher . . . my spoken English is very poor. How to improve my spoken English?”

This short book is my answer to their question. This book will reference modern research, but it is not a book for scholars. This book will contain information that will benefit English teachers, but it is not a book for teachers. This is a book for you, the student.

In my reading, much of the literature concerning language acquisition theory and research are designed for teachers. This is great for teachers. And I’m sure many students have benefited from this if their teachers have read them. However, I believe students should not be dependent solely on the ability of the teacher. I desire to give knowledge to the students themselves so that you will be empowered to take charge of your own learning.

This knowledge is not given so that you can criticize your teachers. No matter who your teacher is; no matter what he does in the classroom, you can learn from him. My hope is that you will eagerly learn from whatever type of instruction you receive in the classroom, and then use this knowledge to guide your self-study efforts outside of the classroom.

### Aptitude

First, let me be frank. There is no magic formula to become a fluent speaker of any language. One of the reasons this is so is that each individual is unique. Students learn differently. Moreover, just as some students are better at basketball or math than other students, some students are better at studying foreign languages than other students. One’s natural ability to learn another language is called language aptitude. The higher your language aptitude; the easier it will be for you to learn a foreign language. The lower your language aptitude; the harder it will be. However, no matter what your language aptitude, everyone is able to make progress.

### Motivation

Motivation. The reason why we study. Though researchers describe numerous subtleties, two types of motivation reoccur throughout the

literature: instrumental and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation is one in which the learner desires to use the language as a tool to achieve some desirable ends. In contrast, an integrative motivation is one in which “learners may choose to learn a particular L2 because they are interested in the people and culture represented by the target-language group” (Ellis, 1997, p75). In various contexts, both motivations have proved important. Of course, students can have both types of motivation at the same time.

Many students in China have a weak-instrumental motivation for studying English. They just want to pass the CET-4 so they can get their bachelor’s degree. Others have a strong-instrumental motivation. They study because they want to acquire a good job or study abroad. Some study English for integrative reasons. They simply enjoy it and want to make new friends. I recently conducted a survey among 33 successful and 33 non-successful English language learners in China. It produced the following results:

<b>Question:</b> <i>What best describes your motivation for learning English?</i>	<b>Weak-Instrumental</b> (pass test)	<b>Strong-Instrumental</b> (get job, study abroad)	<b>Integrative</b> (make new friends, enjoyment)
<b>Successful Learners</b>	9.09 %	24.24 %	54.54 %
<b>Non-successful Learners</b>	42.42 %	39.39 %	6.06 %

[12.12% of both successful and non-successful learners claimed they studied for “no reason”.]

Debate surrounds the question of whether success is the result of one’s motivation or one’s motivation is the result of success. Nevertheless, these results are suggestive. Students who study only for the sake of passing a test are highly unlikely to be successful. Strong instrumental motivations are better. In this study, however, it appears that students with an integrative motivation are most likely to be successful.

As one student responded, “If you learn English but can not speak it fluently, you are like a blind being on the street. You [will] lose many precious opportunities to enjoy the beauty of this world. You are kept inside a dark box. But if you speak [English] well, you will learn about culture, people and life. You feel your life colourful and meaningful. You are not isolated.”

Before you finish the rest of this book, you ought to ask yourself, “Why am I learning English?” If you are only learning so that you can pass some test, you might as well stop here. First, you must realize that English is a key that unlocks doors to opportunities. Opportunities for jobs, travel, new friends, and much more!

More Than Diligence

Everyone believes that one must be diligent to learn English well. However, in my research I found that the diligence of the student is not as great a factor as one would expect. In fact, there was little difference between the diligence (according to their own perceptions) of successful and non-successful English students, as shown in the following chart.

Question: <i>How would you describe your diligence in studying English?</i>	<b>A: Extremely diligent</b> – I followed my study plan all of the time.	<b>B: Very Diligent</b> – I followed my study plan most of the time.	<b>C: Sometimes diligent</b> – I followed my study plan sometimes, but often I was too busy with other things.	<b>D: Not Diligent</b> – I only studied when I wanted to and wasn't busy with something else
<b>Successful Learners</b>	9.09 %	33.33 %	42.42 %	15.15 %
<b>Non-successful Learners</b>	6.06 %	30.30 %	51.51 %	15.38 %

Possibly many of the successful learners actually were more diligent than the non-successful learners. But this at least shows that whether or not learners *feel* they are diligent or not is of little consequence to the success of their English study. 36.36 % of the non-successful learners feel they have studied extremely or very diligently for two years or more but still speak English poorly. In contrast, 57.58 % of successful learners described themselves as only sometimes diligent or not diligent at all, yet they speak English very well. Why do some very diligent students speak English poorly, while other un-diligent students speak English well?

Perhaps the story of Yu Gong, the foolish old man who moved the mountain, illustrates the point. English is your mountain. If you want to learn English well, you should have Yu Gong spirit, diligence. But there is another side to this story. According to the story, an angel has mercy on Yu Gong and moves the mountain for him. How we all wish an English angel would come down and give us the gift of English fluency!

However, this is just a fable. Left to his own method, Yu Gong would not have lived to see his mountain moved. His children's children's children would have had to work continually to reach the goal. It simply would have taken too long. Though Yu Gong possessed diligence, he lacked wisdom. If he had simply moved his house, he would have accomplished his goal much sooner and spared his family a lot of unnecessary hardship.

The same is true for learning English. It is not sufficient simply to study *a lot*, one must study *the right way*. If one wants to learn English well, he must have the Foolish Man's spirit, but the Wise Man's method.

The rest of this book will help you develop a wise man's method.

I suggest that you will acquire language best when you study in such a way that you *1) listen to large amounts of comprehensible input, 2) have opportunities to use the target language to communicate with others, and 3) support your learning with some grammatical learning (focused on making input comprehensible and developing awareness)*.

## COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT

*I suggest that you will acquire language best when you study in such a way that you 1) listen to large amounts of comprehensible input, 2) have opportunities to use the target language to communicate with others, and 3) support your learning with some grammatical learning (focused on making input comprehensible and developing awareness).*

### A Brief History of Linguistic Theory

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the West, language researchers thought that children learned language simply by forming habits, by imitating what was heard. In response to this, Noam Chomsky declared that language was too complex to be learned simply through imitation. Furthermore, if children were simply imitating what they heard, how could researchers explain the mistakes of children? It appeared that children were making mistakes because they were applying “rules” where they did not belong, producing speech like “you hurted me.” A phrase they would never hear in their environment. Apparently children did not simply imitate speech, but were actively constructing “rules” in their mind from the input they received to govern their speech. More importantly, they did not receive enough information about language in their environment to give them all the knowledge they needed to know the things that they knew about language. How could children do this? Chomsky hypothesized that humans are born with a “language acquisition device.” This device is a part of the brain designed specifically for language acquisition and is separate from its other parts. He believed all that was needed to get this device to start working, was input, exposure to language.

Later, researchers began noticing that second language learners also produced language that contained mistakes, yet these mistakes were not arbitrary but governed by “rules.” However, these “rules” could neither simply be attributed to the influence of the native language nor the target language. Researchers refer to this system of rules as “interlanguage.” This interlanguage is transitional. As learners grow in the language, their interlanguage system becomes more and more similar to the target language. In other words, as they make progress their language becomes more and more correct. This “series of interim systems that a learner constructs in the process of acquiring an L2 [second language]” is called the “interlanguage continuum” (Ellis 1997).

Listening

Stephen Krashen (1985) proposed the Input Hypothesis. The Input Hypothesis claims that learners make progress in English acquisition through exposure to comprehensible input. Comprehensible input is defined as “understanding input that contains structures at our next ‘stage’ – structures that are a bit beyond our current level of competence” (Krashen, 1985, p2). This is often designated with the equation “ $i + 1$ ”. The “ $i$ ” represents the learner’s current competence in the second language; the “ $+ 1$ ” symbolizes the features of the input that are beyond the learner’s competence, and which he is developmentally ready to acquire. Accordingly, input that is either too simple or complex will not help a learner make progress in spoken English. To explore this, I asked the following questions with the following results:

<b>Question:</b> <i>On an average day of study, how much time did you spend LISTENING to spoken English?</i>	<b>Less than 1 hour</b>	<b>1 hour or more</b>
<b>Successful Learners</b>	36.36 %	63.64 %
<b>Non-Successful Learners</b>	81.81 %	18.18 %

<b>Question:</b> <i>How well did you understand MOST of the English you listened to while learning English?</i>	<b>A</b> <b>I understood all of it easily.</b>	<b>B</b> <b>I understood the main message but didn’t understand some parts.</b> <i>[comprehensive <math>i + 1</math> input]</i>	<b>C</b> <b>I understood only some of it with great difficulty.</b>	<b>D</b> <b>I could not understand what was said except for a few words.</b>
<b>Successful Learners</b>	15.05 %	84.85 %	0 %	0 %
<b>Non-successful Learners</b>	0 %	57.58 %	36.36 %	6.06 %

The results are clear. The great majority of successful English language learners in this study 1) listen to English for 1 hour or more and 2) listen to the right kind of input, input where they can understand the main idea but not some parts. There are many aspects of the full Input Hypothesis that are seriously questionable. Nevertheless, I believe it is safe to claim that exposure to comprehensible input greatly benefits the language learner.

On the other hand, 57.58 % of non-successful learners are listening to this same type of input. Why are they still poor speakers? Most likely, the amount of time spent listening to this kind of input is insufficient to achieve a higher



level of proficiency, as indicated by the previous question. Finally, 42.42% of non-successful students are not only spending too little time listening, the time they do spend is not much use because the input is too difficult for them to comprehend.

### Gaining Access to Comprehensible Input

Perhaps you are convinced that comprehensible input is indeed important, but you think “How can I gain access to comprehensible input?” There are many things you can do.

#### *The Internet*

The internet can be a rich source of free input. The following websites are loaded with input:

- Randall’s ESL Listening Lab - <http://www.esl-lab.com/index.htm>. This website has short passages, grouped by level (easy, medium, and difficult). It has pre-listening warm-ups and questions to quiz your comprehension.
- The English Listening Lounge - <http://www.englishlistening.com/>. This website also has short passages grouped according to difficulty with comprehension questions. However, only a few passages are available for free. To get full access, you must pay \$20 dollars a month.
- Story Archives - <http://literacynet.org/cnnsf/archives.html>. This website has many news stories. Perhaps more appropriate for high-intermediate or advanced students. It has audio and video options. Contains both vocabulary and comprehension questions.
- Brian Teaman’s Virtual University - <http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/~teaman/vu/index-e.html>. This website is really cool. It has video interviews with English speaking people from all over the world. It is full of vocabulary, comprehension questions, and more.
- Arlyn Freed’s ESL/EFL Listening Resources - <http://www.eslhome.com/esl/listen/#nonauthentic>. This website does not contain listening resources but provides information about several websites that contain listening resources. Some are designed for EFL students and some are not.

### *Radio*

Many students in my study, both successful and non-successful speakers, listened to radio broadcasts, such as the VOA (Voice of America). This can be a good thing, especially for very advanced students, but one must be careful. The stories on the VOA are often very difficult; and since they are on the radio, you only get to hear them once. Most students will not comprehend enough of each story for this activity to be helpful. Of course, one can still listen to the VOA, but it should not be the primary source of listening input.

### *TV/Movies*

Many students also watch English TV and movies. Sometimes these are better than radio because they contain pictures. Pictures are helpful because they can help make the input more comprehensible. The problem with TV and movies is that they are often long and difficult, so that you may lose concentration and comprehend little of what is said. Perhaps the best way to view TV shows and movies is to view them in short periods. With friends, you can predict what you think will happen, then watch the segment, and finally discuss it. You can watch the segment again and again. Also, if you have a transcript of the program, you can read it to check your comprehension. Also, you must not simply read the Chinese subtitles while trying to comprehend spoken English in movies. If you do, most likely you will ignore the English input and severely weaken the benefits of the activity.

### *Crazy English*

Many students also listen to Crazy English. These are great short segments of language concerning topics that many students are interested in. The great thing is that you can listen to the passages as many times as you need to. Plus, the transcript is available with English grammar tips.

### *Purchased Materials*

Perhaps some of the greatest (but also most expensive) forms of comprehensible input are instructional books with cassettes/CDs. For example, when I first came to China, I did not even know how to count to ten in Chinese. Soon, however, I bought Chinese for Beginners with the accompanying listening book and cassettes from the Beijing University and Cultural Press. These materials are wonderful. They provided me with vocabulary and grammar support to understand the reading and listening passages. For one lesson, the same vocabulary and grammatical features would be reinforced through several different listening passages about a similar topic, such as “going to dinner” or “Chinese history.” Then the next

lesson would build on this knowledge and introduce new vocabulary and grammatical features while reinforcing the old ones. I studied my book, listened to the cassettes, and answered the questions everyday and made great progress in the Chinese language. My progress was greater than many foreigners in China. However, I would not have progressed nearly as far if I did not have these materials. If I only watched TV or listened to stories on the internet, I do not believe I would now speak Chinese as well as I do.

### *A Word of Caution*

All of these: radio, TV, movies, and Crazy English, can be wonderful sources of comprehensible input. However, you must keep in mind your level and what comprehensible input truly is. If you find yourself simply hearing sounds and not comprehending the main idea of the passages, then your listening practice is not helping you as much as it should. You can still engage in these activities, but you need to use more strategies to help you understand what you hear. Perhaps you need to look new vocabulary up in the dictionary or listen to shorter sections of the passage.

The bottom line is that if you are not comprehending the main idea of your input, you either need to employ more strategies (i.e. dictionary, repetition, shorten length, etc.) to make it comprehensible or find different, simpler sources of input.

### Strategies

Strategies are helpful for comprehending a listening passage. When you are listening, try the following:

#### Before Listening:

1. Look at the title of the passage and any pictures.
2. Ask yourself questions: What do you know about this topic? What do you think this passage will be about? What information do you hope this passage will tell you?

#### During Listening:

1. Focus your attention on what is being said.
2. Listen for the main idea.
3. Listen for key words and ideas.
4. Relate what you hear to what you already know. (Amato,1996, p55)

#### After Listening:

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1. Ask yourself: a) Did the passage match my guess? b) What did I learn from this passage? c) Summarize the main idea of this passage in 1-2 sentences.
2. Write down any new words you feel are important.

## THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION

*I suggest that you will acquire language best when you study in such a way that you 1) listen to large amounts of comprehensible input, 2) have opportunities to use the target language to communicate with others, and 3) support your learning with some grammatical learning (focused on making input comprehensible and developing awareness).*

Listening to English will help everything. Listening will build your vocabulary, improve your grammar, and even help your speaking. In fact, there are some who believe that listening to comprehensible input alone is sufficient to develop complete oral proficiency, as mentioned before. However, though that may be possible, I do not think it is likely. On the contrary, I believe that using the target language (English) to communicate with another person greatly helps students acquire the English language. This belief is confirmed by the results of my survey.

<b>Question:</b> <i>In an average WEEK of study, how much time did you spend using English to communicate with a NATIVE SPEAKER OF ENGLISH (For example: A foreign teacher or friend)</i>	<b>1 hour or less</b>	<b>More than 1 hour</b>
<b>Successful Learners</b>	39.39 %	60.61 %
<b>Non-successful Learners</b>	84.85 %	12.12 %

The results of the survey show that a student is more likely to be successful if he or she spends at least 1 hour or more each week using English to communicate with a native speaker of English.

However, this information is not new for most Chinese EFL learners. They are aware that communicating with a native English speaker will benefit their English acquisition. The problem with most students is that they either 1) do not have opportunities to communicate with a native English speaker or 2) do not have the confidence to do so. I will address these issues later.

### Why is Communication Helpful?

Many scholars believe that interaction, the act of communicating with another person, plays a significant part in second language learning. First, Michael Long believes comprehensible input is of great value, but believes it is best received through interaction. This is because when a fluent speaker and a less fluent speaker interact, they enter into a negotiation of meaning. As they use the situational context, repetitions, and clarifications to maximize comprehension, the more likely the learner will receive input just

beyond his present competency, the  $i + 1$  input (Ellis 1997, 47; Mitchell 1998, 128-129).

This process is also described in terms of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. The learner collaborates with the fluent speaker to scaffold (utilize discourse, context, or comprehension checks) to produce utterances he would not be able to produce on his own. Thus, learning (and input) takes place at the Zone of Proximal Development, the place in between what the learner could do independently and what he could not do even with help (Ellis 1997, p48).

While Long focuses on the value of the input gained through interaction, Merrill Swain (Ellis 1997) points out several benefits of learner output (speaking) in interaction. First, with comprehensible input, meaning can often be attained without paying attention to the grammar of the input. She maintains output can help students notice a gap between what they say and what they hear; thereby raising their consciousness that some of their grammar is not correct. Second, output provides learners with incentive to formulate and opportunities to test hypotheses. They can apply a rule to an utterance to see if it leads to successful communication or elicits negative feedback. Finally, learners often reflect on their own output, discussing problems and potential solutions.

Many scholars agree that interaction, using the target language to communicate with another person, is beneficial for a variety of reasons.

### Whom Will I Speak With?

If you are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to speak with a native speaker on a regular basis, please grasp it. But unfortunately, many students do not have this opportunity. Whom will they speak with?

Aren't there highly fluent non-native speakers for them to speak with? Such as a Chinese friend who studied abroad, a relative who lives in Australia, or a Japanese or Korean business person who speaks excellent English? Or more importantly, what about fellow Chinese students?

I also asked students how much time they spent each week using English to communicate with highly fluent non-native speakers or their classmates.

Question: In an average WEEK of study, how much time did you spend using English to communicate with a HIGHLY FLUENT SPEAKER OF ENGLISH though he/she is NOT a native speaker of English (For example: A Chinese English teacher with great spoken English)?	A 0 hours	B 1 hour or less	C More than 1 hour but less than 3 hours	D More than 3 hours but less than 6 hours	E More than 6 hours
<b>Successful Learners</b>	42.42%	18.18%	30.30 %	3.03 %	3.03 %
<b>Non-successful Learners</b>	42.42%	48.48%	9.09 %	0 %	0 %
Question: In an average WEEK of study, how much time did you spend using English to communicate with FELLOW STUDENTS who are learning English (For example: a classmate or an older student)?	A 0 hours	B 1 hour or less	C More than 1 hour but less than 3 hours	D More than 3 hours but less than 6 hours	E More than 6 hours
<b>Successful Learners</b>	24.24%	42.42%	21.21 %	12.12 %	0 %
<b>Non-successful Learners</b>	24.24%	48.48%	27.27 %	0 %	0 %

It seems there are more opportunities to use English than just with native speakers. Yet Chinese students do not seem to be taking advantage of them. This is a shame because most students can not afford to be silent while waiting for opportunities to communicate with a native speaker. There simply are not enough foreigners in China to give every student such chances. Students, instead, must do what they can.

### Finding Opportunities to Interact

Here are some ways to practice your English that do not require you to speak with a foreigner:

- **Speak with Fellow English Language Learners** – I do not know why so many students do not speak English with their classmates. Most foreign teachers have students practice with each other in class. So why would one not speak with a classmate because he would rather wait for a foreigner? For when he does get a foreign teacher, the teacher will instruct him to speak with his classmates. I understand students are afraid of listening to poor English and acquiring bad habits. But remember, if you are listening to comprehensible input diligently on cassettes or TV programs, you will still be hearing native speakers everyday. In this case, the benefits surely outweigh the dangers. In China, I knew of a class of students that would often have an “English Day.” A day when they would

only speak to each other in English. This type of activity can be fun and helpful.

- **Speak with Non-Native Speakers Who Speak English Well** – There are many Chinese, Japanese, and Korean teachers and business people who speak English well. Perhaps they can speak with you. Besides, if you get a job which requires you to conduct international business, you will not just be speaking with native English speakers. Many business deals all over the world are conducted in English, even though English may not be the mother tongue of any person at the meeting. Therefore, speaking English with non-native speakers will not only help you acquire English, but also will prepare you for international business communication.
- **Speak Over the Phone** – Many Chinese friends I know have relatives living in English speaking countries that speak English very well. Perhaps you can speak with them in English over the phone. Speaking a foreign language over the phone is not easy, but can be very helpful. My sister speaks Spanish very well. I called her on the phone 2-3 times a week to practice my Spanish with her. I improved a lot from this.
- **Read Outloud** – This is not nearly as helpful as true communication with another person. However, it can help you develop oral fluency and confidence.

### Strategies

- Do not be afraid of making mistakes. Mistakes are normal.
- Realize you will not always be understood. When you are not understood, you may use the following strategies:
  - repeat yourself
  - use gestures (hand movements and body language)
  - say the same thing in a different way
  - use examples
  - give definitions or synonyms for words
- Realize you will not always understand what the other person is saying. When you do not understand, you may use the following strategies:
  - Make guesses about what is being said.
  - Check these guesses by asking questions.
  - Check your understanding by restating what you think the person means. (i.e. Do you mean . . . ?) (Amato 1996)



Saving Face

Perhaps you know you should speak English in one of the above ways, but you do not dare because you are afraid of “losing face.” This is a big problem. In fact, I asked students the following question about face. The results are not surprising.

<b>Question:</b> <i>Which of the following statements best describes you?</i>	<b>A</b> <b>I am not afraid of losing face. Speaking English with foreigners is no problem.</b>	<b>B</b> <b>I am afraid of losing face, but I know I need to practice to get better. So I force myself to speak English with others.</b>	<b>C</b> <b>I am afraid of losing face. So many times I avoid speaking English.</b>	<b>D</b> <b>My spoken English is so poor I dare not speak out.</b>
<b>Successful Learners</b>	48.48 %	39.39 %	12.12 %	0 %
<b>Non-successful Learners</b>	15.15 %	33.33 %	36.36 %	15.15 %

If we combine the results, they give us a better understanding of what is happening.

<b>Question:</b> <i>Which of the following statements best describes you?</i>	<b>A &amp; B</b> <b>[Students who speak without or in spite of fear of losing face.]</b>	<b>C &amp; D</b> <b>[Students who avoid speaking because they fear losing face.]</b>
<b>Successful Learners</b>	87.88 %	12.12 %
<b>Non-successful Learners</b>	48.48 %	51.52 %

These results are disturbing. Apparently 51.52 % of non-successful students are avoiding opportunities to communicate in English for fear of losing face. In contrast, only 12.12% of successful learners avoid speaking in English. The results strongly suggest that if you want to speak English well, you *must* overcome your fear of losing face and begin speaking English with others.

I have always found this ironic. Students attempt to save face by hiding their poor English skills, while this prevents them from gaining face by improving these skills. Which is better? To save face by hiding your mistakes? Or to gain a lot of face by improving your English skills, even though you may lose a little face along the way? The answer is obvious. The honorable thing to do is overcome your fear!

## LEARNING GRAMMAR

*I suggest that you will acquire language best when you study in such a way that you 1) listen to large amounts of comprehensible input, 2) have opportunities to use the target language to communicate with others, and 3) support your learning with some grammatical learning (focused on making input comprehensible and developing awareness).*

In days old, teachers and students spent countless hours talking about grammar. Often these students had a lot of knowledge about the language, but little ability to use it. In recent times, some teachers (mostly in the west) have claimed that grammar teaching is useless. Grammar will be learned naturally through listening to comprehensible input and interacting with others. Often students taught in this way can communicate very well, but often do not speak *accurately*. What is the right way to study grammar?

I believe grammar study should focus on two areas: 1) making input comprehensible and 2) developing awareness to help the learner notice the grammar of the input.

First, a little knowledge of grammar can make input a lot more comprehensible. For example, when I studied Chinese, I had great difficulty with the passive voice. When I first heard it in a listening passage, I had no idea what the sentence meant. It was completely incomprehensible to me, and therefore simply noise. Now, if I listened to hours of input, I might have been able to eventually learn the passive voice. But that is too long and difficult. Instead, the textbook gave me a little information on passive voice sentences using “ba” and “bei”. After reading the explanation, I could comprehend these sentences. A little knowledge of the grammar made the input comprehensible. I went on to learn the passive voice very well and much quicker than if I had not studied any grammar.

Second, when learners are concerned *only* with communicating their meaning, they often do not *need* to be grammatically accurate in order to accomplish their goals. For the passive voice, I needed to know the grammar in order to understand what was being said. But for other aspects of language this is not the case. For example, in English, subject-verb agreement is completely unnecessary to comprehend the meaning of the sentence. Thus, because a student can subconsciously ignore the grammar, he may not learn to speak accurately. This phenomenon is called “fossilization.” Fossilization is when a student, though he may speak fluently, continues to make the same mistakes over and over again even though he has heard the correct way to say them a thousand times.

Some scholars believe that when students learn about grammar, this knowledge can help them “notice” (pay attention to) not only the *meaning* of the input, but also its grammatical *form*. Even though they might not yet speak the form correctly; if they are aware of the correct form, they can then “notice” it in the input. Eventually, after “noticing” a grammatical feature enough, they will use it correctly.

Although unable to test this idea of noticing directly, I wondered if there was a difference between successful and non-successful students in the amount of time they spent studying grammar.

<b>Question:</b> <i>On an average DAY of study, how much time did you spend studying English GRAMMAR?</i>	<b>A:</b> <b>0 hours</b>	<b>B:</b> <b>Less than 1 hour</b>	<b>C:</b> <b>1 hour or more</b>
<b>Successful Learners</b>	24.24 %	66.67 %	9.09 %
<b>Non-successful Learners</b>	36.36 %	30.30 %	33.33 %

Apparently, successful learners claim to spend more time each day listening to English than studying grammar. Therefore, a reasonable inference is that the majority of successful language learners in this study use grammar in a subordinate role; their primary focus is on communication, using English as a tool to receive and send messages.

Accordingly, if the goal is to improve your spoken English, you would do well not to let the memorization of grammatical rules and such activities dominate your English study. Rather, make listening and using the target language the focus of your study. I recommend studying grammar for the following reasons: 1) to make input comprehensible and 2) to develop awareness to help the learner notice the form of input and their own output. This may help you eventually internalize these grammatical rules rather than storing them up in your short-term memory where they will be quickly forgotten after the test.

Remember, the advice for studying grammar here is designed to help you improve the accuracy of your *spoken* English. You may need to study grammar in additional ways to prepare for certain exams or writing projects.

#### Tips for Grammar Study

- Study grammar to help you understand input.
- Study grammar to help you notice grammatical features in input.

- Do not be frustrated that you can not apply the grammar rules you learn in spontaneous speech. This is perfectly normal. Continue to notice these troublesome features in input.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I confess my knowledge of SLA theory is incomplete and the scope of my study is limited. I do not claim to have a magic formula for language learning. Nevertheless, based on theory and data from real successful language learners, I suggest you will improve your English skills if you do the following:

- Move beyond a motivation that simply desires to pass a test to one that views language as a key that unlocks opportunities.
- Listen to comprehensible input on a daily basis.
- Overcome fear of losing face. Find and take advantage of opportunities to use English to communicate with both native and proficient non-native speakers.
- Study grammar in a way that supports the purpose of language, communication, not as an end in itself.

Do not fear losing face. Fear poor English skills! Do not complain about your environment! Do the best you can in the environment you are in! As the Chinese National Anthem declares, “Stand up . . . Stand up . . . Stand up!” Stand up and study English with the right attitude in the right way!

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