

How To Learn English – Practice, Practice, Practice

It's only by **coincidence** that we're starting up here at the beginning of the year, but I think it's a positive coincidence: this is the time of year when many people are making resolutions to do something different in the new year, and, if you've resolved to learn English, **Bite Sized English** will be a good site to help you.

How To Learn English

Don't believe anybody who **claims** to know how *you* should learn English. Or learn anything, **for that matter**. Everyone learns differently, and what works for one person might not work for you. In two years of teaching adults to speak English, **however**, I've never met anyone who *couldn't* learn English, though many of my students thought they were hopeless.

If you can read this, you obviously know you aren't hopeless: your English is already pretty good. But, if you're reading this, you probably want to make it better. So: how can you do that? I'm starting an irregular series here at **Bite-Sized-English.com** to list some of the things that have worked for my students.

Practice Makes Perfect

There's a saying in English that “**practice** makes perfect.” And, it's true, mostly. I had a math teacher who said: “Practice doesn't make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect.”

What did he mean? If you speak English for twenty minutes a day, but those twenty minutes are full of mistakes, your English isn't going to get better. (Though you can still expand your vocabulary that way.) But, if you speak or write in English for just a few minutes a day, careful not to make any mistakes, the vocabulary and grammar will start to 'stick' in your brain.

How can you practice? Obviously, I'm going to tell you to keep coming back to Bite Sized English, because I'm going to **experiment** here with what works in online practice and what doesn't. But, I think the Internet will never be good as real-life practice. If you have a co-worker or someone in your family who speaks English or is learning, too, I suggest you start talking to that person in English.

Even if you don't have anyone to talk to in English, there are things you can do to work on your English. If you're **ambitious** you can try to keep a **journal** in English: get a notebook and write a few lines every day about what you've done on that day. My advice is not to make it into a 'real' journal—that much writing can be very difficult every day, even in your native language—instead, just focus on writing well, using the grammar you know, and learning the vocabulary to describe what you do day-to-day. When you *do* speak English, these are the things you will want to talk about.

Do you own a DVD player? Are there any Hollywood DVDs in your collection? You know what I'm going to say here: watch a movie you already know with the English sound. This might seem difficult at first—if you put on **subtitles**, use the ones in English, not your own language—but it's a great way to passively learn English. Do it regularly and you'll find your vocabulary growing without ever opening a dictionary! A similar idea would be to find some English-language music you like, and translate the **lyrics**. When you hear the song, think actively about understanding it. It might change the way you think about your favorite songs!

How do you practice your English? When you practice, do you think about “perfect practice?” How do you make sure you're not practicing mistakes? Is there someone you practice with?

Vocabulary from the text:

Coincidence: My wife and I live in a city of half a million people. It's not huge, but it's certainly big. Still, we often meet people we know in the city, without planning to. Just the other day, we saw her mother by coincidence.

A coincidence is when something improbable—that means unlikely, or unusual—happens almost as though it were planned. If your car runs out of gas only twenty feet from a gas station, that's a coincidence. If visit New York City and run into an old friend from Berlin, well, that's a coincidence, too!

Claim: You probably know the word say. What if I say to you “only the best-looking people speak English?” Do you believe me? The way I say it, it sounds like I think it's a fact. (It isn't. My little sister speaks English and you should see her!) But, I can claim that it's true, anyway.

When I say something as though it were a fact—whether it is a fact or not—I'm claiming.

something. I can claim that Udo Jürgens is the greatest singer ever (I'm a fan) or I can claim that Dresden is the most beautiful city in Germany. You can use the word as a noun, too. Why not say that Toby makes a lot of strange claims?

For that matter: I know you don't do this, but some of us talk without thinking, and since you can't change what you've already said, we have some phrases to help us speak about what we've already said. For example, have you ever said something specific “it's cold in Dresden” for example, and then realized that your statement was true for a broader, or wider topic? “It's cold in all of Germany.” When we want to say that what we've said about *one* thing is also true for another thing, we use the phrase for that matter.

It's cold in Dresden, or in all of Germany, for that matter. It's difficult to learn English as an adult, or to learn any language, for that matter. I don't like your boss, or any of your co-workers, for that matter. Too many examples gets boring, or too much of anything, for that matter.

However: Sometimes, you want to say two things that seem to conflict. “I hate shopping” might be one thing, but then “I need to go shopping” could be the next. The two statements sound strange back to back, so we use the word however to say that “even though one thing is true, the other thing is true, too.”

Learning English can be difficult. However, I've never met anyone who couldn't do it. I hate shopping, but I have to go, however. It's true that I don't know what it's like to learn English as an adult, I have, however, learned German.

Practice: Are sports players born good? Are musicians born as virtuosos? I don't think so. They get good by spending a lot of time playing sports, or playing music. The time they spend playing just to get good, is practice.

Practice is important in sports. Practice is important if you want to play a musical instrument. Practice is even important for math (I've forgotten most of my high-school math and have to re-learn it.) But practice is especially important for languages. If I don't practice my German for two weeks—say I go home to visit my parents—I can tell the difference as soon as I come back to Germany!

Experiment: Imagine a scientist in a laboratory, trying to find a cure for the common cold. He might have a better idea than you and me of how to do what he's doing, but in the end what he's doing is trying something and seeing if it works. He might think that eating a lot of potatoes will help, so he has to give a lot of potatoes to a patient to see if they help. He's experimenting.

Anybody who tries something, just to see if it works is experimenting. You can experiment with watching DVDs in English, to see if that helps you learn English. Or you can experiment with new recipes, to see if you like them. On Bite Sized English I will experiment with the best ways to practice and improve your English over the Internet.

Ambitious: Imagine someone who starts in a company as the person who cleans the offices. When he comes in to clean your office, he says “one day, I will be President of this company!” He's very ambitious.

We say that a person who expects a lot from himself and the world is ambitious. If you decide to learn three languages at once, you're ambitious. My brother just got a job as a policeman and said it was his goal to be a police chief, we all think he's ambitious.

Journal: I bought a book with no words. It has no pictures, either, just blank pages. I bought it so that I could write in it myself: whenever something big in my life happens, I put the date at the top of the page and start writing. The book is my journal.

A lot of people write in a journal. If you're trying to lose weight, one idea is to keep a journal of your weight, your exercise, and what you eat. If you're working on vocabulary, one idea is to keep a vocabulary journal in which you write down the new words you've learned. Another word for journal is 'diary,' but I think that word sounds too girly for a man who's almost thirty years old.

Subtitles: Do people who are deaf—the word means people who can't hear—still watch TV and movies? You know they do. It's 2009 and televisions and DVD players let them read what the people on TV are saying. They read the subtitles. Most DVDs offer sound in two or three languages, but subtitles in many languages. And even TV shows are available with subtitles now.

Lyrics: Everyone knows Elvis Presley as a singer. But can you sing along with his song “Love Me Tender?” If you know all the words to the song, you know the lyrics. If you don't know the words to the song, what you don't know are the lyrics. Lyrics are always plural in English.

The lyrics to most of the songs that I hear on the radio are pretty simple, but they're not always easy to understand! I'm a native English speaker and I don't always understand the lyrics without having them on paper in front of me. Still, many of my students know lyrics to songs, but don't know what they are singing!