

Blending Learning with Life

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Nowadays, with the penetration of Internet access and the popularization of the Smartphone and tablet computer, we no longer need to spend a great deal of time in class learning a second language. Instead, we can just take advantage of technology and blend learning with life.

Taking English learning as an example, here are some tactics to keep both language learning and life on track:

Reading

The first step towards understanding an article is to have a good grasp of the words. Reading is the most effective way of increasing vocabulary. However, we should never take word learning as the mere goal of reading. Instead, we should choose articles and books of interest. Learning words in context with relevance to sentence structures can help us get to really understand the words and master their usage. Through constant and regular reading, we will get familiar with the common sentence structures, have a touch of the cultural background and hence understand the language in depth.

To start with, we can pick a one-page article from sources of concise and succinct written English, the media in particular, to read every day. Instead of cramming everything into the brain, we should read the article carefully three times. The first reading is for checking every new word and phrase. We then read the article verbatim, paying attention to the pronunciation, meaning and sentence structure. Finally, we go through the story again, this time surveying it mentally. Making use of the convenience of Smartphones, we can do it with mobile applications of news

media on occasions when time passes without much contribution towards life, for example, when queuing at a supermarket cash counter, waiting at a bus stop, or commuting on the bus.

Besides, reading materials are also readily available from casual sources such as magazines and periodicals about pop music, fashions, photography, travel, sports, technology and so on. We can also subscribe to web feeds, read blogs and surf online forums.

Listening

The biggest challenge to improving listening in a second language is that there is no way to anticipate how much we will learn and how far we can reach by a certain time.

A decade ago, when the mobile phone was ‘not so smart’ and fiber broadband was even unheard of, means and opportunities of listening practices were limited. In contrast, we can have sufficient listening practices now. With Smartphone Internet access, we can watch online streaming video, listen to streaming radio and audio books when we are doing things that require little mental effort, like jogging and doing house chores. As we do in our reading, we can also choose topics of our interest for listening. There are, in fact, abundant useful resources online.

Anyone who has ever tried playing reading tapes in the background for the purpose of learning a language would soon find it ineffective because we tend to grow so accustomed to the sound of reading that we would ignore it altogether in the end. Therefore, we need to be actively involved in the listening, paying attention to the content and



trying to comprehend the words and sentences. To make learning take place more effectively, we can repeat the content in mind as we are listening. Though in the beginning we may not understand what we are listening to, we will gradually get acquainted with the language as time goes by.

Speaking

Being able to speak the language fluently is what most of us language learners aim for. To achieve this goal, we have to gain as much exposure to the language as we can.

We can build a solid foundation of phonemes and syntax in spoken English with the above reading and listening practices. However, without really using the language, we will not have substantial improvement. In the old days, we used to seek help from native speakers living nearby or stick to the computer to chat with people on the other side of the Earth. These days, we can search “Conversation Exchange” or “Language Exchange” online to find native speakers offering to provide practices, and then chat with them via mobile applications of Facebook, Skype and the like. In this way, we can practise speaking as time draws on. In addition, while waiting to be served in a restaurant, for example, having a monologue about or consecutive interpretation of a conversation going on within our hearing range are effective practices, too. It is a good way to identify our weaknesses. Where we struggle the most is often what we are weak at. Whenever we are stuck by an unfamiliar word or sentence, we can immediately look it up in an online dictionary, like the Oxford Dictionary.

Writing

Writing, though a separate skill itself, is conducive to the acquisition of the other language skills. People who read, listen and speak well do not necessarily write well. However, those who write well generally master the other three skills with better ease. It is the only aspect for which we have to sit down and be fully absorbed in language learning.

Blogging, keeping a diary, and posting comments on social media sites are effective means for improving writing. During the “peak season” of study and work, we can write a few sentences about our daily encounters and thoughts. When the work schedule is less tight, however, we can try to write longer articles, opinions on current issues or any other new finding or reflection of life.

Twitter, Vine, Instagram, Pinterest and online forums are also great channels through which we can make like-minded friends, keep up with news and current events we are interested in and thus derive great pleasure from reading and composing messages.

Writing practices provide us with information we would be deprived of otherwise. Through writing, we will be aware of what words we do not know and what ideas we cannot comprehend. For this reason, we will be more attentive to narrowing the gap and more intent on improving our proficiency.

All in all, language learning is a tedious and wearisome process. To achieve effective learning, we have to be tenacious and studious. It would be hard to persist if we see it as an individual task separate from life. Only by integrating learning into our daily lives, using the language in realistic settings, and doing the practices in the very real linguistic context can we be on the path to gradual success.