

## IMPROVING ENGLISH

The most common advice to incoming students from students already in the USA: *"Improve your English."* Even if you score high on the SLEP, do not assume that you have the English skills to easily converse with Americans. Many students are surprised by how much difficulty Americans have in understanding them.

**1. Why is English So Important?** Do you want to:

- earn good grades while you are in the United States?
- be able to speak comfortably with your teachers, fellow students, and neighbors?
- have a good relationship with your host family and with your counselors?
- be able to carry out normal procedures without stress?
- be able to shop, talk on a telephone without difficulty?
- get a university scholarship in your field of study?
- make presentations in classrooms or other meetings?
- make friends with people who are not Latinos?
- be able to use English on the internet, in global business, tourism, research, diplomacy?

All of these worthy goals require using English. *Everything will be easier for you, and you will be able to accomplish more of what you want to accomplish, if you speak English well.* Much of your success in the U.S. will depend on your ability to communicate in English. You will need to know how to use a device, obtain information, or convince another person of your ideas. To accomplish these goals you will need English. Students constantly share ideas and information in informal conversations. If you miss out on these conversations, your chances for professional and personal success will be limited compared to your peers.

## 2 Obstacles to Improving English

Several factors seem to impede students from improving their English while studying in the USA:

- Not realizing the importance of good English
- Presence of other students who speak your language
- Shyness and fear
- Americans' reluctance to point out errors
- Finding out that learning English is about more than learning a language

### □□ Not Realizing the Importance of Good English.

Some new students focus entirely on their academic studies, believing that working hard on their studies will compensate for their English-language problems. Later, when they have to write research papers or a thesis or dissertation, or take an oral examination, or give an oral defense of a thesis or dissertation, they realize that they should have worked on their English from the beginning. In addition, when they try to enter a university or find a job after graduation, they find that they are at a major disadvantage.

### □□ Presence of Many Other exchange Students or ease of Access via the Internet

There are many foreigners in the United States. Depending on the community, students may find it easy to carry out much of their social interactions with other ex-patriots. They may study and socialize with them, shop in their stores or watch non-English language TV. The internet allows free and easy communication with friends and family from home 24/7. Some students in this situation even experience a *decline* in their ability to speak English after they come to the United States. Of course, any student can resist the temptation to communicate daily in your language, but doing so requires special effort and determination.

### □□ Shyness and Fear

Some individuals are naturally shy and are cautious in social situations. They do not like to draw attention to themselves. They fear being embarrassed or misunderstood. They fear not being able to understand what people say to them. Such people have much more difficulty practicing and learning a foreign language than do people who are more willing to speak up and less bothered by making a mistake in another language.

### □□ Americans' Reluctance to Point Out Errors

Even if you ask them to, most Americans will not point out grammatical or pronunciation errors you might make. The Americans may consider it “rude” to let you know when you say something incorrectly. The Americans most likely to help you by correcting your errors are those trained in teaching English, but American students studying yours or other languages may be willing to help you even more if you ask.

### □□ Finding that Learning English is about More Than Learning a Language

Many speakers of other languages report feeling “different” when they speak in English. They feel “more free.” They think about things differently. This is because a language embodies a culture, so that learning another language requires learning something about another culture. An example, North Americans put priority on their space, privacy, time, ideas, and possessions. These words embody key concepts from an individualistic society. Latin Americas put more priority on friends, family and feelings. But while good manners and avoiding conflict make for a peaceful society, sometimes problems fail to be resolved when not confronted head on. Learning about a new culture, as well as a new language, is also challenging and tiring.

## **3. Ways to Improve English**

Whether learning another language is comparatively easy or difficult for you, your *goals* and *attitude* about improving your English have a strong effect. If you are determined to use your American experience to improve your English, and you make a conscious effort to do so, improvement is more likely. There are many approaches to improving your English while you are in the U.S. Of course you can use more than one.

Formal ESL (English-as-a-second-language) classes are available at many schools to help non-native speakers improve their command of English. These programs provide grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, writing, and conversation at a variety of levels such as beginning, intermediate, and advanced. They are most effective in the early months before you start to think in the language.

Tutors working with one student offer individualized assistance. Tutors can be expensive, however your classmates will probably help for free, especially if you help them!

Mass media can help. Television, radio, newspapers, and magazines expose you to everyday English and give information on topics you can discuss with others—news events, social trends, athletic contests, etc.

Public speaking opportunities will help you greatly, so if PEACE asks you to go speak to world language class students, be eager even if you are afraid. Answering the same questions all day in different classes will get easier as the day passes. When you see that you have their sympathy, as they imagine themselves doing the same in your country and you see that you can even get a laugh, your confidence will soar.

Do-it-yourself English improvement is probably the most accessible form of English language practice available to foreign students. But it requires some determination and preparation. The remainder of this chapter gives detailed guidance for practicing English on your own. *First*, some mental preparations.

1. Never forget that *improving your English is one of your main goals* while you are studying in the U.S.
2. Resolve to *practice every day*. Make a *commitment* to yourself to practice English with your host family before and after school for at least thirty minutes every day. Start conversations with students at school between classes, at lunch and in activities *daily!* The longer you wait to start the harder it will be to start.

**4. Overcome your anxieties.** The idea of speaking English with Americans you do not know may make you nervous. Here are some suggestions for overcoming your anxiety:

--Remind yourself again what you can *gain* from improving your English.

--Remind yourself what you will *lose* if you do not improve your English.

--Ask yourself, “What is the worst that can happen if I try to talk and get a negative response?” Maybe the person will say “no.” Maybe the person will walk away from you. The person might even say something unpleasant to you, or behave rudely. Could you survive that? *Of course you could.*

**5. take action to improve your English:** Prepare some conversation topics. Approach people you like.

### Prepare Some Conversation Topics

You may feel reluctant to approach Americans because you do not know what to talk about. But there are

hundreds of things you could discuss! Get some topics ready in advance. Memorize them, or have them written down so you can refer to them. Here are a few possibilities:

- Reasons you came to be an exchange student
- Your plans for after you graduate
- Your families—where they are, what your parents' occupations are, any siblings you have
- Description of the place you lived when you were a child
- Experiences you remember from your early childhoods and grade school
- How you celebrated birthdays when you were children and now
- How various holidays are celebrated
- How you spend your weekends
- What you like to read about
- Words or slang expressions you have heard but did not understand (write them down when you hear them.)
- Something in the day's newspaper
- Plans for the coming summer
- Popular television programs or personalities
- Places to eat and what you ate in your home community

#### Locate People to Talk To by Finding People who *share your interests*.

- Find a student club in your favorite subject, join it and volunteer to do some of the organization's work.
- If you play sports, join a team, go to a recreation center like the YMCA or a playing field or court.
- Join a club based on non-academic interests like drama or ecology. The guidance office has a list and the school website probably does, too. The public library will probably have a list of organizations in town.
- Volunteer to help at the local public library, a nursing home, fire company or other local organization.
- Talk to people who spend time where you go, such as *classmates, school staff, neighbors, and secretaries* If they are doing something, volunteer to help with some small task, and talk while you are doing it.
- Consider joining a *Bible-study group at school or in your family's church or a friend's church*
- Force yourself to attend social functions like school games and dances.
- Find *people at leisure* (who are not obviously busy). For example, you could approach people who are:
  - eating in the cafeteria
  - taking a study break at the library
  - waiting for a performance or a class to begin
  - sitting beside you in class or sitting beside you on the bus

#### Approach People You Can Talk To

Be committed to practice English. Look for someone who seems available. *Don't hesitate!* Walk up and:

- a. Smile! (For Americans, a smile is a sign of friendliness and good intentions.)
  - b. Introduce yourself. Say, "Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm new here, and I need to practice my English. Can you talk with me for a few minutes?" If your name is hard for them to pronounce, write it to show them.
  - c. Say something about yourself: "I'm from \_\_\_\_\_. I'm an exchange student.
  - d. Bring up a topic. For example, "I have some words here that I don't know the meaning of. Can you tell me what they mean?" Or, "I wonder if I could ask you about [whatever topic you choose from your list]."
  - e. After the conversation, say "Thank you, I enjoyed talking with you. I hope to see you again soon."
- Persist! If your first few attempts to start a conversation do not work out, do not be discouraged. Keep trying. And after you have some successful conversations, keep it up!