



# *Study Skills for ESL Learners*



## Table of Contents

- I. General Self-Study Tips**
- II. Advanced Study Skills**
- III. How To Memorize New Vocabulary**
- IV. Improving Your Listening Comprehension**
- V. Tips for Taking Multiple-Choice Exams**
- VI. Note Taking Skills for the New TOEFL® iBT**

Copyright © 2005. ESL Pro Systems, Ltd. All rights reserved.

Visit us online: [www.esl-pro.com](http://www.esl-pro.com) and [www.eslprosystems.com](http://www.eslprosystems.com)

# I. General Self-Study Tips

When you choose to self-study something like a second language, you are your own teacher and are in charge of your learning. As a result, your learning depends on your own attitude, participation, self-discipline, and study habits. The following are a number of tips that you may find useful:

- Make language practice part of your daily routine.
- Tolerate ambiguity. When someone is speaking to you in English or when you are reading, you do NOT need to understand every single word.
- Mistakes are part of the language process. It is OK to make some mistakes while you speak. Take some risks, and do not let fear of making an error keep you from speaking the language.
- If someone says something confusing to you, use phrases such as:  
*“Can you repeat that?” “What does ‘X’ mean?” “Can you say that more slowly?”*
- If possible, visit a country where you can use the language you are learning.
- Watch movies in your new language and try to identify words and phrases that you have already learned in your studies.
- You do not need native language fluency to begin using your new language, so try to use what you learn as soon as possible. Try to form friendships or acquaintances with people who are native speakers of the language you are studying.
- There is more involved in learning a new language than just new words and sounds. Behind every language is a new culture and a new way to think. Try to learn as much as you can about the culture of the people who speak your new language. Keep your eye open for community events in your city’s cultural districts.
- Tune into radio stations that broadcast in English. Learn the words to new songs! The "Voice of America" Internet radio that broadcasts in dozens of languages. ([www.voa.gov](http://www.voa.gov))
- Rent movies or watch TV shows produced in English. Many DVD's are available with multiple language captions. You can choose to listen in English and have the captions come up in your new language, or just listen with no captions.

## ➤ A final word about self-motivation...

Anyone who has studied and learned a foreign language will tell you that there are times when you will reach a plateau and it might feel like you have stopped learning. Just as a child might feel that they will never "grow up", adults know that they are growing, albeit more slowly than the child would like.

If you are diligent with your studies, you don't really stop learning a language, but plateaus can bring your learning experience to a grinding halt as your own self doubt begins to sabotage your efforts, making you ask yourself, "*Am I wasting my time?*" and "*Is all this effort worth the trouble?*" Keep in mind that this is a natural part of the learning process. Whenever you start to feel that you haven't learned anything, just go back to your first or previous lessons and you will soon see how much you have progressed!

Therefore, don't give up! The world is full of people who wish that they'd learned a foreign language. You're certainly one of these people, or else you wouldn't be reading this right now!

---

## II. Advanced Study Skills

One of the challenges at university is the amount of reading you will have to do. This is worrying even for native English speakers, and especially daunting for non-native speakers. At first, it can seem overwhelming. However, there is a range of strategies you can apply to help you to read faster and to remember more of what you have read. The following information will help you to understand and use some of these strategies that will make your life as a student a lot easier. The strategies below have been deliberately kept simple so that you can apply them.

Before you start reading, you need to know your purpose for reading a particular text. At times, you might only have to **skim** the information, which means you try to understand the **main idea**. It is a bit like taking the cream from the top of the milk. Often this is quite enough and will give you all the information you need. An example of this could be the pre-reading you have to do for a lecture or tutorial. Sometimes you might quickly skim over an article to see if it is relevant for your research.

## ➤ How do you skim for the main idea?

In order to skim a text for the main idea, open a page from your textbook, preferably one you have to read anyway. After reading the page, stop and ask yourself what the main idea is. Don't worry about remembering all the examples or the unimportant information ('padding') at this point.

Then write the main idea on a piece of paper or in your notebook. If you remembered more than one main point, decide which ones are important. You might find that only a few are **really** important. Underline them. Now tell yourself what the main ideas on that page are. Do this aloud, if possible, because repeating the information aloud will help you to remember it much better.

This kind of reading is usually quite sufficient for pre-reading for lectures or if you want to prepare yourself for discussions in tutorials. After you have practiced this, you might decide to underline or highlight the main ideas in your text and not to write them down. Do whatever works for you.

At other times **scanning** a text will be sufficient. Scanning means you are looking for **specific information** in a text. For example, if you are doing research and you are looking for some specific information to back up a statement you have made, you don't have to read every word. All you need is to find that one statement.

## ➤ How do you scan for specific information?

Again, take a page from your textbook or an article you have to read. Choose a word or a fact you want to find in the text. For example, you might want to find a definition of a word, the name of a theory or anything else you need to know. Sometimes your lecturer will give you specific pre-reading questions you'll have to answer. Read the text as quickly as possible until you find that word or bit of information you are looking for. Mark it on the page. Keep reading to check if it appears again. If it does, mark it again. At this point read only this information. Later on, you might have to read the paragraphs that come before and after in some detail to understand the context of the information. That again depends on your purpose.

Remember, **scanning** is a useful strategy if you are trying to find out if an article contains **specific information** you need for an essay or report, for example. Usually it is not necessary to read the whole article in detail.

**Note taking** is another critically important skill to master at the university level. It is not a single 'skill' which you can acquire once for all times and occasions. It

is a range of different activities, the common characteristic being you are writing for yourself rather than an audience. It is more a strategy than a skill. It involves listening to talks and lectures and reading texts in an active way: thinking “*What is this about?*” and “*What do I want to remember?*” and writing down the answers. It also requires flexibility; in other words, your notes can be as detailed or sketchy as needed. You need to keep asking yourself “*Are these notes doing the job I want, or could I be using my time more effectively?*” and changing your approach accordingly.

Whatever note taking strategy you use (there are several), remember to note only the main ideas, nothing else, unless you want an example. You should try to structure your notes so that they make sense and are easy to read later. If you can write clearly, make every effort to do so as you will find that reading and revision later much easier if you are not looking at scribble and trying to figure out what you might have meant.

If you are a non-native English speaker and are planning to enter a university in an English-speaking country, you need to carefully evaluate your study skills. Are they good enough? If not, you may want to consider looking at ESL Pro Systems’ new ***Advanced Study Skills Workbook***. This workbook, in PDF format, has been developed to help non-native speakers of English improve their listening and reading comprehension ability along with the corresponding writing skills of note taking and summarizing/paraphrasing. You will learn how to listen effectively to lectures and talks, read faster, summarize and paraphrase, and take useful notes through practice exercises that cover a wide range of stimulating topics. After completing this workbook, you will be better prepared for the rigors of studying at the college or university level in English-speaking countries.

---

### III. How To Memorize New Vocabulary

The typical English as a second language learner needs to hear and use a new word 30 to 40 times to truly learn it. A beginning student will have a vocabulary of about 500-1,000 words. A fluent speaker has a vocabulary of 8,000 words or more. The Oxford and Webster Dictionaries lists over 500,000 words. Of course there are millions of words not listed in the dictionary and countless technical words. Clearly, learning vocabulary is very important, but how can you really expand your vocabulary?

#### ➤ Learn, Memorize, Use, and Review

If I give you a bat and then tell you to hit the ball, can you hit the ball? Maybe. You need to learn how to use the bat through practice. Then you can *sometimes* hit the ball. Can you hit it two weeks later, or a year later? You might forget how to use the bat. If you want to be able to increase your vocabulary, you have to first **learn the meaning of many words**. After learning the meaning of some words, it's time to **memorize** them.

Each day, **use** a few words 3 - 5 times. Say them smoothly. Create a situation.

For example:

**New words:** *tickle, bitter, concern, battle, curious.*

tickle - *At home, I tickle my dog. I don't like to be tickled. I tickle my friends.*

bitter - *This coffee is bitter. I like bitter chocolate. That old woman is very bitter. Why is she so bitter?*

concern - *I am concerned about my grades. My mother is always concerned about me. She is not worried; she is concerned. The phone call was concerning your class schedule.*

battle - *Learning is only half the battle. There are many battles in Iraq. I am battling to learn English.*

curious - *I am a curious person. I am curious to know whether Americans like to eat kimchi. My curiosity often gets the best of me.*

## ➤ REVIEW!

If you learn, memorize, and use five new words a day, are you going to remember those words in a week, month, or year? Probably not. You need to continually **review** them.

Do you like to exercise?

Yes? Great! Then you understand how important a routine is. If you stop doing your routine, then what happens? YOU GET FAT! In English, you forget your words.

## ➤ Tips:

- Think in whole phrases and with emotions. Don't just memorize words but memorize a whole sample phrase with the evoked emotion. E.g. (Spanish) In order to remember the word 'bread', which in Spanish is '*pan*', use the sentence "*I eat bread with butter*": "*Yo como pan con mantequilla*". (Try to imagine that you are eating the bread.)
- Likewise, try to imagine graphically the word or action you are learning. Can you see the bread with butter in front of your inner eye, even just for a flash? If so, this is a sign that your brain hemispheres in synch and the newly learned word will be available without requiring conscious recall.
- Repeat the whole phrase or sentence until you can say it without hesitation, like a reflex - just like a karate move. Language *is* a reflex.
- Substitute words from your new language into the language you speak normally. This will, of course, cause fewer problems if you limit this to conversations with people you have notified of your strategy.

E.g. (French) "To make a cheese sandwich, put *fromage* between *deux* pieces of *pain*."

- Use a good learner's dictionary. A highly recommended online dictionary can be found at: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>
- Write any new word you encounter and its definition in a vocabulary notebook. This notebook should have three columns: one for the new word, the next one for its definition, and the next one for an example sentence. If you can enter just 5 new words a day in your vocabulary notebook, that's 35 new words a week, 150 new words a month, and 1800 a year! Learning word families is a great technique.

For example, if you have just learned the verb *expand*, why not learn the noun form *expansion* and the adjective form *expandable* as well?

- You can also write the words on “Post-it” notes and put them around your room, apartment, or house. Write down new words in two columns, one for your native language and one for the language to be learned. Then go over them day after day in alternate directions and carry those words you haven’t remembered so far over to a new page. This kind of repetitive writing often helps memorization.
  - Order a copy of our [1000 Key Words & Idioms](#) guide to further help you with expanding your vocabulary and improving your spelling.
- 

## IV. Improving Your Listening Comprehension

To be able to listen well gives you confidence in communication. You can only talk sensibly when you can understand what is said to you. Failing that, you may miss important information presented to you, or respond in a funny way. Listening in everyday life is a real-time skill. Unlike reading, you often don't have the chance to adjust the pace of speech, listen again, or check an unknown word. The need to understand what you hear on the spot makes it even more crucial that you develop the ability to listen well.

Do you think that listening is about understanding every word that is spoken? If so, think again. Even though good listeners may be able to get every word that they hear, this is not their concern most of the time, as our experience with our first language tells us. So do specify your listening objectives when you carry out a listening activity. As long as you achieve your objectives, you are a good listener - whether you catch every word or not.

So, what can you do outside of the classroom to improve your listening comprehension, especially if you don't have a chance to converse with native speakers? One thing you can do is to listen to the news on a regular basis.

### ➤ [Listen to the News](#)

Try listening to the news on a regular basis. It's an excellent way to practice authentic listening. You can listen to the news on the radio, on television, or even on the Internet.

**The following web sites are highly recommended:**

[www.voanews.com](http://www.voanews.com) (USA)

[www.cbc.ca/listen/](http://www.cbc.ca/listen/) (Canada)

[www.cbsnews.cbs.com/](http://www.cbsnews.cbs.com/) (USA)

[www.abc.net.au/ra/asiapac/listen.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/ra/asiapac/listen.htm) (Australia)

➤ **Tips:**

- It's helpful to first listen to the news stories in your own language before you listen in English. Perhaps make some notes of the main stories, including any names of people or places.
- Don't worry about how much you understand. Listen to or watch the report first a few times 'just for fun'.
- Stop and review as many times as necessary.
- Write a brief summary (one or two sentences) of each story.
- Set yourself a few questions to answer. Then listen again for the answers.
- Make notes of any new vocabulary you think is useful.
- Why not listen to the news with a friend? You can help each other by talking about what you each understand.
- When you feel confident, try listening to the news in different accents (Scottish/ Irish/ Canadian/ Australian/ South African, etc.).

➤ **Evaluating your progress**

It is hard to measure improvement of listening ability precisely. However, the following may give you some indication of whether you are making progress:

- Reflect on your general ability to cope with the news at a regular interval, say every two weeks. Compare this to how you felt at an earlier time.
- Play a news story in short sections. Stop after each section to re-tell the content. Assess how many times you need to rewind the tape to get the story accurately.
- If you have a partner watching the same report, you can quiz each other after viewing.
- Assess your knowledge of words that are commonly used in the news. This should be growing gradually. You should not stumble over the same words again and again.

Be sure to supplement your news broadcast listening practice with the practice activities and strategies contained in the following ESL Pro Systems products:

- [Learning English Listening Workbook](#)
  - [Learning English Advanced Listening Workbook](#)
  - [Listening Workbook for the TOEFL® iBT Test](#)
  - [Listening Workbook for the TOEIC® Test](#)
- 

## V. Tips for Taking Multiple-Choice Exams

Sound test-taking strategies are especially important with multiple-choice questions found on language tests such as the TOEFL® and TOEIC® exams. These types of questions often include clues that may help you identify the correct answer. You may be able to improve your performance on such tests by considering the following advice:

- Read the directions carefully. The directions usually indicate that some alternatives may be partly correct or correct statements in themselves, but not when joined to the stem. The directions may say: "choose the most correct answer" or "mark the one best answer." Sometimes you may be asked to "mark *all* correct answers".
- As you read the stem of each multiple-choice question, anticipate the answer before looking at the options. If the answer you anticipated is among the options, it is likely to be the correct one.
- Always read each question completely. Continue reading even if you find your anticipated answer among the options. There may be a better option farther down the list.
- Learn how to quickly eliminate options that are highly implausible. Many questions have only two plausible options, accompanied by "throwaway" options for filler. You should work at spotting these implausible options so that you can quickly discard them and narrow your task.
- Be aware that information relevant to one question is sometimes given away in another test item.

● On items that have "all of the above" as an option, if you know that just two of the options are correct, you should choose "all of the above". If you are confident that one of the options is incorrect, you should eliminate this option and "all of the above" and choose from the remaining options.

● Options that represent broad, sweeping generalizations tend to be incorrect. You should be vigilant for words such as *always*, *never*, *necessarily*, *only*, *must*, *completely*, *totally*, and so forth that create these improbable assertions.

● In contrast, options that represent carefully qualified statements tend to be correct. Words such as *often*, *sometimes*, *perhaps*, *may*, and *generally* tend to show up in these well-qualified statements.

### ➤ Myths about changing answers

A number of myths exist about the best way to take tests. For instance, it is widely believed that students shouldn't go back and change their answers to multiple-choice questions. However, the old adage that "your first hunch is your best hunch on tests" has been shown to be wrong. Empirical studies clearly and consistently indicate that, over the long run, changing answers pays off. Like most students, the majority of college instructors will probably tell you that answer changing usually hurts a student's test score, even though the evidence contradicts this belief. When the data from all the relevant studies are combined, they indicate that answer changing on tests generally does not reduce students' test scores.

## VI. Note Taking Skills for the New TOEFL® iBT

Each month ESL Pro Systems presents informative articles and study tips to help our readers improve their English. We also present teaching ideas from time to time. This month we are focusing on note taking skills you can use to excel on the new TOEFL® iBT Test.

### ➤ The TOEFL® iBT Test

What's different about the new TOEFL® Internet-based test (iBT)?

The TOEFL® iBT, which will be introduced in September, has a new Speaking section, which includes independent and integrated tasks. There is no longer a Structure section. Grammar is tested on questions and tasks in each section. Lectures and conversations in the Listening section are longer, but note taking is allowed. In fact, note taking is allowed throughout the entire test. The speech in the listening material sounds more natural, and one lecture may use a British or Australian accent. Also, there are new questions that measure understanding of a speaker's attitude, degree of certainty, and purpose. The Reading section has new questions that ask test takers to categorize information and fill in a chart or complete a summary. In the Writing section, typing is required. There is an integrated task in addition to the current independent task, and the scoring guides (rubrics) used for rating are different from the current test.

### ➤ Preparing for the TOEFL® Test

When using preparation materials such as ESL Pro Systems' [How to Study for and Master the TOEFL® iBT Test](#) and our [Practice Tests for the TOEFL® iBT](#) series of practice tests, it's important to practice taking notes (especially in the Listening section) in order to maximize your chances to correctly answer the questions. Here are some tips on how you can improve your note taking skills:

- Use a large 8 1/2" x 11" notebook with plenty of paper. Divide the notebook into sections, one section for each subject (eg: biology, geography, history, etc.). If your notes for each subject are together, this consolidates your knowledge.
- Date your notes for each lecture. Use a pen, never a pencil. Write legibly.

- Keep your attention focused on what the speaker is saying. Listen for “signal statements” that tell you that what he or she is about to say is important to write in your notes. Examples of signal statements are “*The most important point...*” and “*Remember that . . .*” Be sure to include in your notes information that the speaker repeats or writes on the chalkboard.

Try to keep your attention from wandering until the speaker finishes. Listen actively instead of passively. Put down main ideas, but also include supporting details. Listen for clues. If the speaker stresses specific pieces of information, write it down.

- Do not copy verbatim every word that is spoken. You are not a court reporter. Take notes selectively. Again, Do NOT try to write down every word. Remember that the average lecturer speaks approximately 125-140 words per minute, and the average note-taker writes at a rate of about 25 words per minute. Think, analyze, judge, compare, digest what the lecturer says; then, in your own words, summarize the main ideas and key facts in a few brief, logical phrases. Try to use the language of the subject as often as you can.

- Don't be too concerned with spelling and grammar.

- Right after the lecture, or just as soon as possible, write the main points, questions, and cue words in the left-hand column. Try to develop some questions, and use your own key words and ideas. Underline some of them. Use colored pencils or pens. Draw arrows from your ideas in the summary to your notes. Star important points - make them stand out. Make each page look different.

- Review your notes right after you make them. Review by covering the right-hand section of your notes. Then, using your summary, see if you can recite the notes in your own words when they are covered up. If you can, you know them. If you can't, this is the best time to learn them. Review as often as you need to.

➤ Here's an example of notes taken from a lecture on ESP (extrasensory perception) using the outline method:

July 2

### Extrasensory perception

**-definition: a means of perceiving without use of sense organs.**

**-three kinds -**

**-telepathy: sending messages**

**-clairvoyance: forecasting the future**

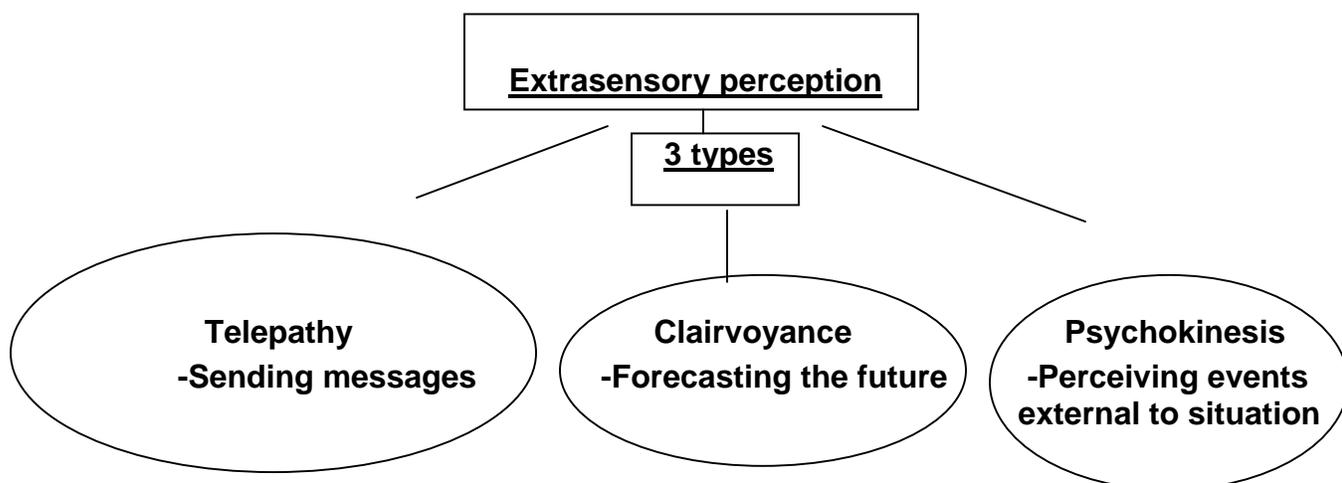
**-psycho kinesis: perceiving events external to situation**

**- current status -**

**-no current research to support or refute**

**-few psychologists say impossible - door open to future**

➤ Here's another example from the same lecture using the mapping method:



➤ Here's one more example using the sentence method:

(original text from speech)

*At first, Freud tried conventional, physical methods of treatment such as giving baths, massages, rest cures, and similar aids. But when these failed, he tried techniques of hypnosis that he had seen used by Jean-Martin Charcot. Finally, he borrowed an idea from Jean Breuer and used direct verbal communication to get an un hypnotized patient to reveal unconscious thoughts.*

**Notes:**

**Freud 1st -- used phys. trtment; e.g., baths, etc. This fld. 2nd -- used hypnosis (fr. Charcot) Finally -- used dirct vrb. commun. (fr. Breuer) - got unhynop, patnt to reveal uncons. thoughts.**