



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

Improving Second Language Fluency

Fluency is the ability to use a language quickly and smoothly and communicate ideas effectively. Language teachers often contrast it with accuracy. Accuracy is about correctness of grammar, sentence structure and word choice. Sometimes students put **too much focus on accuracy**. This causes 3 main problems:

- Language use is very slow. The slowness can be caused by using translation from a first language or from stopping and worrying about the correctness of every word that is used.
- The ideas of writing or reading get lost because of a focus on correctness instead of a focus on communicating ideas. This can damage the content of a paper or the understanding of ideas in reading.
- Improvement in English is slowed down. This may be caused by translation strategies, over-reliance on dictionaries (especially bilingual dictionaries), and reduction in the amount of English used. Good language learners are happy to guess, are okay with incomplete understandings, see making mistakes as a learning opportunity, use English a lot and try to think in English.

Generally, second language speakers develop fluency in listening and speaking before they develop fluency in reading and writing. In speaking and listening, you don't have time to worry too much about correctness. Also, if you live here, it is usually possible to get quite a lot of practice in speaking and listening. This handout explores how you can approach language learning and strategies you can use to increase your fluency in reading and writing in English. Try out the strategies and see what works for you.

Approach to Language Learning

If you want to learn English as quickly and as well as possible, you need to do a number of things:

- Use English as much as possible. Listen, speak, read and write a lot. Find ways to practice your English when you are not in class or doing homework. Some people find volunteer jobs, participate in programs at the college like sports programs, or join clubs or sports groups at local community centres.
- Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Mistakes are part of the language learning process.
- Accept that you won't always understand everything perfectly. Usually, your goal should be to get the main ideas of something you read or hear, not to understand everything completely.

Here are some other approaches you should try:

Think Positively about Your Knowledge

When you use English, you should focus on what you can do or understand, not what you can't. Many people put a lot of energy into worrying about what they can't do. This discourages learning and the development of fluency.

When you write or speak, focus on what you know and what ideas you can express clearly. Congratulate yourself for your abilities. Do not punish yourself for making mistakes. Mistakes are part of learning.

When you read or listen, concentrate on what you can understand. You should be like a detective. You are looking for information. However, just as a detective does not need all the details to solve a crime, you do not need all the information to understand. Many details are unimportant.

Think in English

Many students find it difficult to think in English, especially while they read and write. However, if you can do it while you speak and listen, you can do it while you read and write. It may take some determination, but it is possible.

Use English to Learn English

Never go through a reading and translate unknown words into your native language. Using your native language will slow down the language learning process. This is why most good language classes use only the new language.

If you can read this handout, you have enough English to put away your bilingual dictionary and use only English-English dictionaries. This will help you to speed up your language learning and use English more like a native English speaker. Sometimes you may not be 100% clear on the exact meaning of a word, but that's okay. Having a general idea of the meaning of a word is usually enough. When you encounter the word again in other contexts, you will refine your understanding of the word.

Use the Words You Know

In reading, this means you should guess the meanings of words you don't know by thinking about the overall meaning of the text. When you are reading, it is not productive to look up every new word in a dictionary. Instead, you should try to guess the general meaning of the word using the meanings of the words you know. Again, as a reader you are like a detective. If you need help to learn some strategies to guess word meanings,

ask your tutor for the Learning Centre handout VS2.20 Understanding Vocabulary in Context.

In writing, using the words you know means you should write your ideas using the words you are already comfortable with. At a later stage in the writing process, you can try to add in fancier words, but when you are writing the first draft of an assignment, you should just use the words you already know so that you can focus on ideas while you're writing.

Keep Rules in their Place

Some students feel that there should be a rule to explain everything in a language. However, that is not the case. Many aspects of English cannot be explained by rules. In other cases, even though there may be a rule, it is more difficult to learn the rule than to just remember the way we say things. You need to accept that a lot of language learning involves learning how language is used by people. Rules have limited use. Too much emphasis on rules and grammar exercises can hold back the development of your fluency.

Conclusion

This handout has suggested general strategies for improving fluency in English. For more specific strategies in reading and writing, ask a tutor for the following:

RS10.11 Developing Reading Fluency in a Second Language

RS10.12 Developing Writing Fluency in a Second Language