

Using Technology to Master English

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In today's world, English language ability is an increasingly vital skill for success. The language of international business and trade is English and as of 2010, there were over 536 million English Internet users—over 100 million more than any other language (Internet World Stats). English is the new *lingua franca*—the language of the world. It's now more important for Japanese students to learn English than ever before, because many Japanese businesses are making English their official language. Rakuten, Inc. and Uniqlo are two of the better-known companies which have mandated their official company language as English. There are sure to be others to follow. Further, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) will require that high school English classes be taught primarily in English in 2013 (Craft). Teachers will need to be proficient enough in English to teach all four skills in English, so they need to begin working now to improve their fluency. Malone, Rifkin, Christian, and Johnson report that “it can take up to 720 hours of practice for a student to achieve proficiency at the ACTFL *Advanced* level (one level below *Superior*)” (1); therefore, it is necessary that English language learners (ELLs) take advantage of all options for studying and practicing English.

Overcoming Past Challenges

In the past, learners of English in Japan had difficulty becoming fluent in English due to a lack of proficient partners to interact with. Technology now gives everyone around the world the ability to contact anyone else, anywhere in the world almost instantly. Friedman called this the flattening of the world. This paper presents several resources that English language learners can take advantage of in this flattened world to improve their communication skills. The resources and tools discussed below do not require special equipment or have fees for use—they are all free and readily available to the general public. Many of them do not even require a computer, as they can be accessed via cell phone due to Japan's vast 3G cellular phone network, surpassed only by that of South Korea (International Telecommunications Union). ELLs should be aware that there are detractors to using cell phones to access language learning materials as opposed to using a computer (see Terui, Noguchi, & Robb), but using a cell phone to practice English is better than not practicing at all.

The way one accesses these tools is irrelevant. What is relevant is the fact that ELLs who hope to improve their language skills must find a way to integrate regular language practice into their daily or weekly routines. 700 hours of English practice sounds unachievable, but if a person uses a variety of technology tools to interact with other English speakers, the hours will add up quickly and their fluency will soar. The tools and programs explained below can be easily added to one's busy

schedule without demanding a lot of time.

Tools for Reading Practice

There are thousands of websites and pages that are focused on helping ELLs learn to read English better. It is difficult to know which are better than others and how to use the exercises provided. The sites discussed below have proven to be useful, well-structured, and praise-worthy.

Voice of America

Reading is the skill in which most Japanese ELLs excel due to their intense focus on reading comprehension and grammar throughout their junior and senior high school terms. However, the English used in these programs is not always as current as it could be. Therefore, ELLs should continue to work to improve their English reading skills. Reading online newspapers is a good way to practice reading English while on-the-go. Not all English-language newspapers are written at a level for ELLs to easily understand, so it can be frustrating if an ELL tries to read the news but cannot understand the report. *Voice of America* helps ELLs get beyond this frustration.

One excellent tool for practicing reading English and staying abreast of current events is the *Voice of America (VoA) News Learning English* website. This website has current news articles from the United States and around the world written in simplified English for ELLs. This site uses a core vocabulary of 1500 words to report on world events, medical discoveries, and scientific breakthroughs while helping people learn American English (Voice of America). Also, the VoA website provides word games and word history to help ELLs increase their vocabulary (see the Web Features section shown in Figure 1). Each news headline is followed by one or two icons indicating whether the report contains an audio file, a transcript to accompany the audio file, or both. ELLs can use this site to stay informed about what is happening in the rest of the world without having to struggle with the complex English vocabulary and grammar typically seen in English news reports. Reviewing one or two reports on the *VoA News Learning English* website two or three times per week will help ELLs improve their reading comprehension.

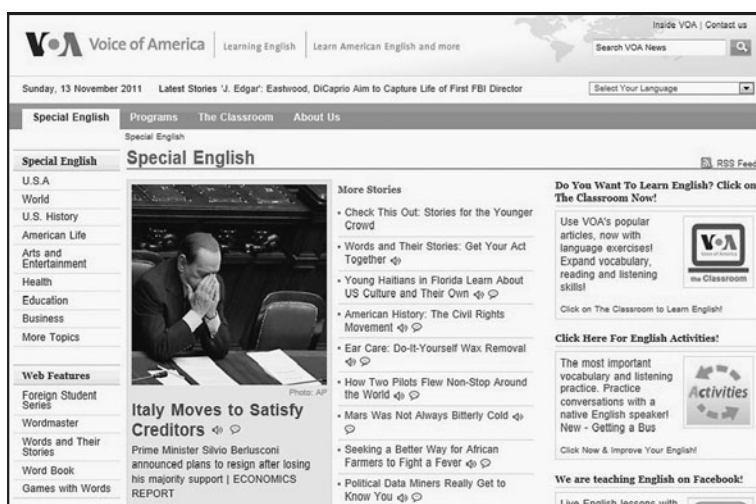


Figure 1. VoA Learning English website

Social Networking Sites

ELLs who have a network of friends often maintain their relationships with their friends using social networking websites like *Facebook* or *LinkedIn*. These social networking sites allow people to keep in constant contact with their friends and can provide an opportunity to read and use current English. Interacting with friends for 10 to 15 minutes several days per week will help ELLs become exposed to current English—albeit possibly less grammatically correct English—and its uses. Seeing how English idioms and slang are used will provide ELLs with a resource for learning English that is not usually included in textbooks: This will lead to improved fluency.

Tools for Listening Practice

One problem ELLs have is that their ears have difficulty hearing non-native sounds such as those of English. This is because from infancy, their ears have become attuned to the sounds of their native language. Therefore, L2 learners frequently have trouble perceiving non-native sounds (Flege and Hillenbrand). Listening to English regularly can train one's ears to hear English sounds, intonation patterns, and rhythms so that an ELL can hear words and phrases more easily. Technology has allowed ELLs greater access to a wide variety of audio materials for listening practice. However, the English heard in many Japanese high schools and, unfortunately, universities is still the scripted audio or video materials associated with textbooks. Thankfully, ELLs are not constrained by this fact—they can easily access volumes of audio materials right from their computers or cell phones. The content available is educational, entertaining, and free.

VoA Learning English

The *VoA Learning English* website discussed above also offers audio clips which accompany the news stories. ELLs can listen to the audio reports while reading along with the transcripts. This allows ELLs to train their ears to hear the sounds of the words their eyes are reading and learn to match them up. News reports are not as exciting to listen to, so ELLs may be more interested in videos made by English speakers around the world.

YouTube

YouTube is an excellent source of English-language videos that ELLs can watch whenever they have a few moments of free time (e.g., when riding the train, waiting for the bus, or killing time between classes). *YouTube* also has thousands of educational videos for ELLs on a wide variety of grammar or conversational topics. For example, a search of the keyword “esl” in November 2011 returned over 150,000 videos about learning English, ranging from pronunciation lessons like how to create the “th” sound, to basic practical tutorials such as greeting people, to advanced grammar lessons on how to use conditionals. In addition to educational videos, *YouTube* has millions of other videos on almost any topic of interest to ELLs to watch and practice listening to English.

Internet Radio

In addition to watching and listening to *YouTube* videos, listening to Internet radio streams also helps ELLs train their ears to hear English sounds. Internet radio broadcasts give ELLs around the world access to current spoken English and can be listened to any time the ELL desires. Internet ra-

dio can be streamed through portals like *iTunes* or directly from a station's website. Two examples of Internet radio stations are *Live365.com* and *Star104.net*, which offer a variety of music genres from alternative to talk radio. Listening to English, even passively while doing other activities, will enable ELLs' ears to become attuned to the speech patterns of English speakers, thus helping them to grasp the content of what's being said more easily.

Tools for Writing Practice

While Japanese ELLs are more proficient in reading and grammar, their writing ability is still in need of improvement. Having someone to practice writing with would greatly assist ELLs in improving their English writing. The Internet gives ELLs easier access to English speakers than ever before and several websites are devoted to helping language learners connect with native speakers in writing.

The Mixxer

One of the websites geared toward helping to connect language learners with proficient speakers is *The Mixxer* – a free educational website for language exchanges hosted by Dickenson College in the United States. *The Mixxer* offers users a place to write journals or blogs in their second language (L2) and have native or proficient speakers of that language comment on their writing and suggest corrections. When registering for this free website, the user indicates what language(s) they speak fluently and what language(s) they are learning; then the website suggests partners who speak the language

being studied and who want to learn the user's native language. This helps users find language-learning partners with a common interest to interact with.

A user can simply post a blog entry in their L2 and other users can read it and comment or suggest corrections. The feedback received helps users improve their L2 while they get acquainted with other language learners and develop a friendship. Figure 2 shows a blog posted by a Japanese university student in English and comments made by another user highlighting suggested changes. After the corrections were made, the other user added an encouraging comment—which could be an opening for the Japanese student to begin building a friendship with the person via the program.



Figure 2. English blog with corrections from *The Mixxer*

There is one feature which sets *The Mixxer* apart from other similar websites: It is the connection between *The Mixxer* and the web-based audio/video networking program, *Skype*. *The Mixxer* not only enables language learners to develop text-based relationships with other users, it provides a simple way for users to connect and practice speaking to one another via *Skype*. On *The Mixxer*, user

profiles list *Skype* names and indicate whether or not the user is online and available to chat using text, audio-only, or face-to-face using video. *The Mixxer* is an excellent tool for improving all language skills and for making friends with other language learners around the globe by using it once or twice per week. These interactions will help ELLs learn the culture as well as the language.

Livemocha

Livemocha is another free online language learning community which offers language courses and an opportunity to practice writing in one of 35 different languages while receiving feedback from other proficient speakers and language learners from around the globe (*Livemocha*). *Livemocha* is similar to *The Mixxer* in that both websites provide an opportunity to write in an L2 and have other proficient speakers provide feedback and suggestions for improvement. *Livemocha* also provides suggested language partners who speak the user's L2 and desire to learn the user's native language.

One outstanding feature of *Livemocha* is that it provides structured lessons for language learners to grow in their language. The lessons range in difficulty from basic to advanced and have a variety of tasks for users to use their L2. The user's writing is then posted for native speakers to comment on and provide constructive feedback. Early lessons are free for users and more advanced lessons can be earned by accumulating points given for providing feedback to learners of one's native language. For language learners who desire a more structured and guided form of learning through technology, *Livemocha* offers a great option to help them reach the next level.

Social Networking Sites

As discussed above, social networking sites such as *Facebook* are an excellent place for ELLs to practice reading current English. They also provide an opportunity for ELLs to put the new words and phrases they learn into practice. Keeping in contact with friends on social networking sites helps students become proficient at writing by posting updates about events in their daily lives. Spending 10 to 15 minutes several days per week will help ELLs become literate in current English and its uses in everyday textual conversations.

Tools for Improving Speaking

The lack of fluent English-speaking partners has been one of the greatest factors hindering the growth of communicative proficiency among Japanese ELLs. Technology allows ELLs worldwide to reach out to proficient English speakers for the one key to success in fluency: practice. Spending 10-15 minutes per day two or three times per week practicing with a more fluent speaker will make an amazing difference in a person's communicative ability.

Skype

Skype is a free program for computers, as well as for some mobile phones, which provides a means to converse with another person anywhere in the world using text, audio-only or video chat via the Internet. Once an ELL develops a relationship with an English speaker via websites such as *The Mixxer*, *Livemocha*, or social networking websites, they can arrange to speak to one another live using *Skype*. The *Skype* website has great support features to help novice computer users download, install and begin using the program to practice speaking English with friends. Speaking practice done

once or twice per week will quickly lead to improved communicative fluency.

SecondLife and Other Virtual Worlds

Another exciting opportunity for ELLs to practice speaking English is by entering a virtual world such as *SecondLife* and interacting with other users in the program. A virtual world is an on-line community that takes the form of a computer-based simulated environment through which users can interact with one another and use and create objects (Bishop 6). Virtual worlds are not as mobile as the other websites or programs mentioned above, but they do offer a means of virtually interacting with other people using avatars; so they provide a similar experience to *Skype* but without the need to have already established a relationship before interacting with the person. In virtual worlds, the user creates an avatar, or animated image used to interact within the virtual world. Once in the virtual world, the user can travel to various locations and interact with other users' avatars. Most virtual worlds allow spoken interaction between avatars so virtual worlds provide ELLs an opportunity to practice speaking English with other proficient speakers.



Figure 3. Avatars chatting in the *SecondLife* virtual world

Virtual worlds do require a higher level of computer knowledge and experience than most of the above websites or programs. However, it is worth improving one's computer literacy because of the dynamic interaction possible in virtual worlds. Figure 3 shows three avatars chatting in English in a section of the virtual world, *SecondLife*.

Internet Safety

When using Internet tools and websites to interact with other people, everyone should remember to protect their own privacy and safety. The Internet Safety Center and Web Wise Washington suggest the following rules for using social networking sites and for interacting with others on the Internet:

- Do not use a full name. Use a first name and last initial or another name that protects one's personal identification.
- Do not post any address, or home or cell phone number.
- Try to limit discussions to people with whom a relationship already exists; try not to randomly chat with anyone who happens to be online.
- Be careful with pictures posted online. Consider what information someone could learn from viewing the pictures.
- Use extreme caution when considering meeting someone from the Internet in person. Should one decide to meet with an online acquaintance, do so in a public place, tell a friend where the meeting will occur, take a cell phone, and most importantly, do not go alone.
- Make sure that the maximum computer privacy and security settings are enabled. This will

help prevent contact by an unknown person and will minimize risk of computer virus infection.

- Always remember that anything said or posted online is there forever—do not share personal, private information that is meant to be kept secret.

Conclusion

All of the research on foreign language learning stresses the fact that the only way to improve one's proficiency in a foreign language is to practice regularly. The tools explained above offer ELLs a way to practice English with native or more proficient speakers using technology. When using these wonderful tools, ELLs should also remember to protect their personal information and their personal safety. There are many different technological tools for language learning which focus on different language skills; when they are used together on a regular basis, ELLs can greatly increase their overall English proficiency. Fluency in English will be a true asset for Japanese students in the flattened world of the future.

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