The Journey of Learning English

Translated by ChatGPT. Missed some pictures.

After struggling for many years and trying various methods, using numerous apps, I finally found a way to make myself love English and enjoy it without the need for constant effort. I developed the habit of using English frequently, reading English news and books, watching American TV shows without subtitles, browsing English websites, reading and listening extensively. I also had some experiences communicating with foreigners and even earned some money by communicating with Dutch clients in English for a website project. Let me share my journey.

In high school, I found English textbook articles quite dull. However, I discovered the book "Hackers & Painters" by Paul Graham, which introduced me to his interesting and unique ideas. I started reading many of his articles on his personal website. Whenever I encountered unfamiliar words, I would look them up in a physical dictionary, which was a slow process. Despite the tedium, the content was so captivating that I continued. I also attempted to read some English books like Orwell's "Animal Farm," but due to numerous unfamiliar words, I lacked the patience to continue.

In college, I continued reading many articles on Paul Graham's website, using a Chrome plugin to translate words, which sped up the process. As a programmer, I occasionally had to visit technical Q&A websites like Stack Overflow and GitHub, where I became familiar with programming-related vocabulary. However, my ability to converse and read English books remained limited.

In 2016, I visited the United States. Despite my broken English, I managed to engage in simple conversations, ask for directions, and chat with Uber drivers. Nonetheless, I often struggled to understand and felt embarrassed.

After that, I focused on my work, and English was not a priority for me. I only occasionally read articles and looked up words. My listening and speaking skills remained weak, and reading was still challenging.

In May 2019, I wanted to take on international projects for my outsourcing company and registered on Upwork. To my surprise, a client from Amsterdam, Netherlands, reached out, and we agreed to work on a website project through WhatsApp communication.

We had several voice calls, but my listening skills were still poor. I had to ask the client to speak slowly and repeat himself multiple times. Despite successfully completing the project and earning a few hundred euros, I realized I needed to improve my English.

I used the Kindle Mac app to read "The Accidental President," a book about President Truman during World War II. It was a painful experience due to the extensive specialized vocabulary and geographic references.

However, overcoming this challenge boosted my confidence. I thought that if I could finish such a lengthy book, I could handle other articles and everyday written communication.

I continued reading several English books, such as "The Everything Store" about Amazon's entrepreneurship story, "To Pixar and Beyond" about Pixar Animation Studios, "Jony Ive" about the Apple designer, "Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman" about physicist Richard Feynman, "Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind," "The Meaning of It All" by Richard Feynman, and the first ten chapters of "The Feynman Lectures on Physics." I also attempted novels like "The Great Gatsby" and "A Mathematician's Apology" by G.H. Hardy, as well as "A Brief History of Time."

Reading English books was a test of patience, requiring me to immerse myself in the process without worrying about finishing them quickly. I learned not to set rigid goals and allow myself to read at my own pace. This way, I could understand and appreciate the content better.

Books helped me familiarize myself with vocabulary and improved my comprehension. However, they did not significantly enhance my listening skills. So, I turned to watching American TV shows and documentaries on Netflix without subtitles. Although I didn't understand everything, I told myself it was okay and focused on picking up some vocabulary. I watched various documentaries like "Mission Control," "Our Planet," "American Factory," "Spielberg," "The Bleeding Edge," "The Dawn Wall," "The Edge of Democracy," and "Hondros." I also watched several seasons of "Friends."

As time went on, my listening skills improved, but I still faced difficulties understanding certain details in videos.

I attempted to use vocabulary memorization apps like "Youdao Vocabulary" but gave up after a few days. I realized that memorizing words was unnecessary. I believed that familiar words should be learned through repeated exposure and understanding, while rare words could be looked up as needed. Moreover, constantly memorizing obscure vocabulary was tedious and not practical.

I also tried joining English learning groups on apps like Telegram (similar to WeChat) and connected with an Iranian friend for several hours of voice chatting to improve my speaking skills. Although it was helpful, speaking with a native English speaker was challenging. However, it did open up opportunities to meet people from different countries, like an Indian guy with whom I had a video call, introducing each other to our families.

Reflecting on my English learning journey, I realized I had taken many detours. Instead of focusing on whether learning was enjoyable, I forced myself to undertake difficult tasks. Just like when we were kids learning Chinese, we immersed ourselves in Chinese culture through martial arts films, which eventually allowed us to understand and speak the language without much effort. The key was immersion and enjoyment.

I believe that after mastering around 1,000 basic English words, one should immerse oneself in listening and

watching content like TikTok videos or American TV shows. TikTok is especially beneficial because it combines entertainment with immersive language learning, simulating face-to-face interactions with foreigners. By doing so, we can naturally learn more words and understand more content without the need to memorize extensive vocabulary lists.

I concluded that the best way to learn is to play, to enjoy the learning process, and to genuinely feel the desire to continue. TikTok has been instrumental in my language improvement, and I wholeheartedly recommend it to others. However, accessing TikTok requires bypassing restrictions for users in some regions, which may involve using a separate Android phone or learning to access foreign networks.

In the process of learning English, I also reflected on the nature of learning. I discovered that I couldn't excel in self-discipline and perseverance, but I thrived when learning became a form of entertainment that I genuinely enjoyed. If we can embrace learning as an enjoyable experience, it becomes effortless and sustainable.

In the end, I came to understand that being fluent in only one language, like Chinese, is perfectly fine. It allows us to live a fulfilling life in our home country, with an abundance of knowledge and resources in our native language. However, for those interested in learning English, I wholeheartedly recommend embracing immersive and enjoyable methods like TikTok to make language learning a fun and stress-free journey.