

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN ANY LANGUAGE IS VOCABULARY. Here are some tips for improving yours.

It is important to realise that it can be a waste of time just learning lists of words. This can be OK if you have the time, and you then have chance to use those words in practice. If not, you can waste time learning words which are then useless when you need them.

I learned some of my languages doing this. It CAN work, but most of the time it is a waste of mental energy. And боже мой it is so boring!

Before reading these tips, note, you are only learning English when you can USE what you learn.

Knowing what things mean during study is just the first step.

So whatever method you find suits you best, always try to use the new vocabulary when you speak or write English.

Technique 1

Read

The best way to learn words is to read read read. I will repeat that because it is so important. Read read read! Again, read read read!

Even if you don't study the new words in any great detail, by reading you will see hundreds of correct new words in context. Get an English book you think will be interesting. Forget study when you read for enjoyment. If you see English as just something to study, your brain will always see it as quantity of information. In reality, language is about quality of communication.

If you read a lot, make a note of the new words and check the meaning afterwards in a good dictionary, or with your teacher - hopefully me, if I can find time for new students.

Only stop reading to translate these words if you need them to understand the story. Just enjoy the book, or newspaper. It really works. I learned Italian mainly reading La Gazzetta dello Sport and books by Tiziano Terzani. It was hard at first, but the most useful thing I did.

Technique 2

Record yourself.

Most of you have apps to let you do this. With the new words, record yourself speaking the English word, and then the word in your own language. Don't go too fast. Maybe leave 3-4 seconds between each word.

Then, play the words back and write them down as you hear them.

Second time, do the same and try to write the translation before you hear it. By the time you do this three or four times, you should know most of the words.

Technique 3

Study with your cat.

Cats may have a limited spoken vocabulary, but their lexical resource is awesome. Ask them to meow when you get a word wrong. They could even put their paw over the translation to give you time to think about it. Or if this fails, it's just nice to have some company during those long hours of language study.

OK, only joking.

Technique 4

Vocab cards

Easy and popular technique, which I used to learn basic Russian.

Put the English word on one side of a small card or piece of paper. Then, the word in your language on the other side.

Look at one side of the card and think what is on the other side. Then check to see if you are right. Easy, and effective.

There is probably an app for things like this, sadly I am still in the technological Stone Age and therefore have no idea what's available.

Technique 5

Label things - most useful for lower level students.

Put cards round your house on things, and every time you see them, memorise that word.

I labelled my house in Italy when I started learning Russian. Within an hour my flatmates, who were not learning Russian, already knew the words for toilet, door, window and rice, etc. After 6 months one of them was still asking me to close the OKHO when he felt cold.

Pity about his pronunciation.

Only remove these words when you know them.

Technique 6

Do crosswords and play word games in English. No explanation needed here, but don't get frustrated if it is difficult. Even learning five words each time you play is progress. Scrabble is a good game to play. I used to play with my higher level students in Bishkek, and some of them even beat me sometimes (I am not good at word games). But more importantly, they learned so much.

Scrabble is a good game for students because you also get chance to discuss the new words, and if you are with native speakers, they will make sure to refuse you the points if you get a word wrong. Great way to learn spelling.

If you are a teacher reading this - be warned, once you play Scrabble with your groups they will ask for it every lesson.

Technique 7

Cooking

For higher level students, cooking with recipes in English is useful. If you make a mess of the Yorkshire pudding you can be sure you misread something somewhere.

You may think this technique is limited to cookery words, but in actual fact there are other structures and words that you will need to pay attention to as well.

Technique 8

Write stories. Simple if you have a talent for writing, but even if you don't, you can still put all your new words into a single text, which means you are thinking about how they are used instead of just what they mean.

Technique 9

Start a language log.

This is like a vocabulary list, but for each word you need to add more information.

Learning the word 'decisive' is fine, but do you know how to use it?

Write it in your log, but in addition to the translation, also include info about if it is a noun, verb, adjective etc

Google it and write some example sentences where it is used.

Then write your own sentence for each.

It's a lot of work, but if you have long-term plans to improve your English, and you do five words every day, this is a great way to learn.

Technique 10

Change your phone to English. Change your Facebook settings to English, gmail, everything. Surround yourself with English and learn to depend on it. Get out of your comfort zone. Only use your language when you have to.

Of course, make sure you know how to change your language settings back to your language.

Technique 11

Keep a notepad with you (or use your phone) and make a note of ALL the new English words you hear or see every day. Just write them down. Remember the context if you can. Check them later, when you get chance.

When I was in Italy, I used my notepad every day, but I also used it to note every single thing I failed to say during the day. For example, if you are in a shop, and you want to ask for something, but you don't have the vocabulary, make a note of it and check it later.

Technique 12

Speak English with your friends. I know it can feel unnatural to speak English with your best friends when you normally speak Russian or Kazakh etc, but try it. You may not learn new words directly, but it gives you more confidence with what you already know.

Think about it like this. You may love shopping, you may buy new clothes every week. But if they are stuck in your wardrobe and you don't wear them, what use are they?

Vocabulary is like this, if you don't use it, you lose it.

Technique 13

Do a language exchange.

Sadly, many native English speakers in Almaty are not committed to learning Russian so it can be difficult to find somebody locally. But there may be some, and once or twice a week just engaged in conversation is a great way to practise.

I can actually offer this option currently as my previous exchange partner moved to the USA.

If not, try www.mylanguageexchange.com

Technique 14

Role play films.

This is brilliant! Try it!

Download the script for an English film you know and like, and either print it or put it on your phone, iPad etc.

Then, choose a main character from that film, and when they speak, do a voice over. This is a better technique for fluency, but you will see new words too, and you have already used them in context.

Don't try to understand the new words until later on.

Technique 15

Marry an English person and live in England for 10 years.

No, wait, I have already given you this tip.

MORE TIPS AND HELP ALWAYS AVAILABLE TO MY STUDENTS!

BRING YOUR CAT TO CLASS AND YOU GET A DISCOUNT.

OK, only joking.

Good luck!