EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING

Unit 1: Preparation

Introduction

Effective English Learning is intended for anyone who is a University of Edinburgh student – whether you are following a programme by distance learning or are living in Edinburgh. During your studies there will be many potential opportunities to improve your English in informal contexts, outside your academic programme. It could be in conversation with other students – either face-to-face, if you are in Edinburgh, or on-line, if you are a distance learner.

These EEL self-study materials are designed to help you to think about and practise ways of improving your English informally.
There is no “magic bullet” in language learning. No particular way of learning a second language is guaranteed to produce faster or greater progress. So it makes sense to consider a variety of techniques that other international students at the University of Edinburgh, in a similar situation to your own, have found helpful in their English learning. Having access to a wide range of options and choices allows you to adopt or adapt others’ techniques to suit your needs.

*EEL* brings together information from three sources:

- **research** into language learning, including our own research at Edinburgh
- more than 30 years’ **teaching experience** at the Institute for Applied Language Studies and the English Language Teaching Centre
- **advice from other international students**, who have told us what has helped them to improve their English outside the classroom.

As you study these materials, when you read what other students say about effective ways of learning English, think about the possible differences between that person's situation and your own. The key questions to ask yourself are:

- *Would this work for me?*

- *If so, in what circumstances?*
• If not, could I adapt it to suit my situation?

Each EEL unit contains regular Tasks for you to think about. These activities, which are marked with grey shading like this, work best if you can study the materials and discuss your answers with a partner – either another international student, or a British student. (That is how we use the materials in the classroom version of EEL).

At the end of each unit you will find a Feedback section, including our comments on and answers to the Tasks. In some cases, there is a single correct solution; in others we give an opinion – feel free to disagree!

There are eight units, each focusing on a different aspect of English learning:

1. Preparation for language learning
2. Listening
3. Grammar
4. Reading
5. Vocabulary
6. Writing
7. Speaking
8. Pronunciation

We hope that EEL will help you to find your own ways of making your English learning more effective.

If you would like to suggest other ideas we can add to these materials, please email A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk
Learning another language is like learning anything else. We make progress by a combination of practice, observation, instruction, and imitation. We learn by monitoring our performances and noting our mistakes. Some things become automatic quite quickly; others continue to require conscious attention to get right.

Many areas of language learning involve a combination of **knowledge** (e.g. the meanings of word) and **skill** (e.g. recognizing the word in rapid speech). In the opening tasks in this unit, we will be comparing learning English with learning to drive.

Think carefully about each answer; you may find it helpful to make brief written notes. If you can, discuss your answers with someone else. Then compare your answers with those given in the Study Notes at the end of this unit.

**Task 1.1: Knowledge and skills**

What factual knowledge do you need to drive a car?

What skills do you need?

When you are ready with your answer, click **here** to see our Feedback.

**Task 1.2: Ability to learn**

Do you think some people are better than others at learning to drive?

If so, what is it about them that makes them better?

Click **here** for our answer.
Task 1.3: Knowing a foreign language

Language learning involves a variety of types of knowledge. 'Knowing a word' requires more than knowing just what it means. What do you need to know, for example, to be able to use the English expression 'How do you do?'

Check your answer against ours [here](#).

Task 1.4: Evaluating success in learning

How can you measure someone's success in learning to drive?

How can you measure success in language learning?

Our answer is [here](#).

Task 1.5: Influences on foreign language learning

Which of the factors shown below do you think are important influences on success in learning another language? Put a tick against the ones you think are influential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>knowledge of other foreign language(s)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>height (how tall you are)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amount of foreign language practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>type of foreign language practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personality</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>number of brothers and sisters</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>intelligence</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Then choose ONE of the factors you have chosen and explain in detail how it might influence success.

Compare your opinions with ours [here](#).
'Common sense' about language learning

We have begun EEL with this general discussion of language learning because we want to question some of the common assumptions that people make about how best to learn another language. Here are two of them:

Assumption 1 - Adults find it harder to learn a foreign language than children do.

Assumption 2 - Learning a foreign language is more effective with a teacher than without a teacher.

Learning a language as an adult (Assumption 1)

Task 1.6
Think about Assumption 1. Do you agree with it? Why?

When you have thought through your views on Assumption 1, read the text in the Study Notes.

Task 1.7
The paragraph in Rubin and Thompson's book that followed the extract you have just read begins, 'Age does have some disadvantages, however'. What do you think those disadvantages could be?

To see what Rubin and Thompson’s view, click here.
The role of the teacher (Assumption 2)

So far we have talked about learning and learners, rather than teaching and teachers. That distinction is important: in language learning, a teacher can help you a great deal in some areas, but less in others. The important thing is to identify the areas in which you can make progress without a teacher or a language class. That is the purpose of these EEL materials.

Task 1.8

Think again about driving a car. Which aspect of your own driving is the weakest?

Could a driving instructor help you to correct that weakness, or is it simply a matter of practice and experience?

Is there anything you could do for yourself, to improve your performance in that area?

(These are open questions, with individual answers, so none are provided in the Feedback section).

Task 1.9

What is the weakest aspect of your English at the moment?

Think of one way in which a teacher could help you.

Think of one thing you could do for yourself, in order to improve.

(Again, these are open questions)

The balance between teaching and learning

Some years ago we asked international students on a 3-month English summer course (20 class hours per week) to estimate how much of their progress they believed was due to working in class with their teachers, individual work such as homework and self-access study, and informal practice outside the classroom.

These are the average figures in their responses:

- Classwork 45%
- Individual study 27%
- Informal practice 28%
Task 1.10
Does anything about those figures surprise you?
What do you think they tell us about the importance (or lack of it) of the teacher’s contribution?
For Feedback, click [here](#).

Differences in learning need

Needs vary from individual to individual. A student who feels that her spoken English is relatively good may decide to concentrate in non-class time on reading and academic writing.

Conversely, someone who is having problems in understanding British spoken English might choose to focus on practice with web materials or CDs, rather than on grammar and writing exercises.

So it is essential to establish your particular needs in English as early as possible. That will help you to plan your individual learning. Deciding what you need most is not a once-and-forever decision. It is a matter of deciding your priorities at the moment, and then reviewing them later, when you feel you have done enough work on the area of initial priority, so you can move on to a different aspect of your English.

Task 1.11
Have a look at the self-assessment questionnaire on the next page. Think about how competent you feel in the areas shown, and complete the questionnaire.
**English self-assessment questionnaire**

Show your assessment of your abilities in English, from *POOR* to *VERY GOOD*, by highlighting the appropriate number:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>POOR</th>
<th>FAIR</th>
<th>GOOD</th>
<th>VERY GOOD</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>READING</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• general vocabulary</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• specialist vocabulary</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• speed of reading</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• accuracy of reading</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|            |      |      |      |           |
| WRITING    |      |      |      |           |
| • general writing (e.g. letters) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| • academic writing | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| • sentence grammar (e.g. verbs) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| • mechanics (e.g. punctuation) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |

|            |      |      |      |           |
| LISTENING  |      |      |      |           |
| • face-to-face conversation | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| • lectures (and notetaking) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| • radio/TV news programmes | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |

|            |      |      |      |           |
| SPEAKING   |      |      |      |           |
| • speed and fluency | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| • pronunciation of sounds | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| • using stress to show meaning | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |
| • contributing to discussion | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 |

When you have completed your assessment, click here for Feedback.
Whatever your particular needs are, a key factor in your progress is the efforts you make to help yourself improve and your overall approach to language learning. These EEL materials partly draw on research into effective language learners by Professor Joan Rubin and Professor Irene Thompson of Harvard University. Their pioneering book *How to Be a More Successful Language Learner* (1982) describes language learning strategies that have worked well for some people, which we have reduced to twelve EEL principles:

1. Find your own way  
2. Let context help you  
3. Learn to live with uncertainty  
4. Make your errors work  
5. Use your linguistic knowledge  
6. Be creative  
7. Use different styles of speech  
8. Organize  
9. Use mnemonics  
10. Keep the conversation going  
11. Learn some lines as wholes  
12. Make the most of your opportunities

They are not shown in order of importance, but in their order of appearance in *EEL*. In our seven units we will be illustrating the value of particular principles in specific areas of English.

Some, like Find your own way, are relevant to every area; others relate mainly to one, but are also linked with other skills. The diagram below shows the interrelationship between the 12 Principles and the *EEL* units:
That first principle, *Find your own way*, underlines what we have covered in this opening unit: that individuals learn in different ways, and what will make your informal learning of English in Edinburgh most effective is applying the techniques that you find *work best for you*.

The aim of *EEL* is to give you a wider range of options from which to make those positive learning choices. We hope you enjoy working with the materials.
Preparation for Language Learning:

Feedback: study notes and answers

Task 1.1

Some types of **factual knowledge** are essential: familiarity with local traffic laws and/or 'Highway Code', and with local driving conventions (e.g. what it means when another driver flashes their lights - is that a warning to get out of the way, or an invitation for you to go first?)

Other types of knowledge are **desirable but not necessary**: e.g. how a car engine works.

The **skills** needed for car driving include the following: hand/eye coordination; dexterity in changing gear; ability to judge the speed of other vehicles; a capacity to process information from different senses - e.g. hearing (the instructor's voice, the sound of the engine), sight (ahead, and in the mirrors) and touch (to establish which gear you are in).

[Click here to return to the page where you were reading.]

Task 1.2

Various aspects of general temperament might be important, such as patience and calmness under pressure.

Among the language learning attributes commonly discussed are aptitude, motivation and previous experience of other languages. (Some others are listed in the feedback on Task 1.5).

[Click here to return to the page you were on.]

Task 1.3

To be fully competent in using the expression 'How do you do?', you need to know:

- what it means - i.e. how it differs from the same words in 'How do you do that?'
- when it is used - on first meeting someone but not, for example, by parent to newborn infant
• to whom it is said - to one person at a time, i.e. the “you” is singular
• how to respond when it is said to you - by repeating the question, not by answering as you would answer 'How are you?'
• what normally precedes it - for example, 'My name is / This is Kenneth Anderson'
• whether it is accompanied by a physical action, such as a handshake or bow
• what style it represents - formal, versus informal 'Hello', 'Hi'

Click here to go back

Task 1.4
Success in learning to drive might be assessed by whether the person passes the official driving test; whether they have any accidents; whether their friends are willing to be passengers in their car.

Success in learning a foreign language is most frequently measured by teachers through tests at different levels (cf. the standard and advanced driving tests); observation; interview.

However, many researchers argue that formal tests should be supplemented by assessment by learners themselves, such as in self-reports, peer evaluation.

Also there has been a move away from classroom-type tests towards tests involving real, or realistic, communication tasks - which could be compared with the standard driving test, involving real traffic.

To return to the page, click here

Task 1.5
All of the factors in the list could be influential. The notes below may complement the reasons you have thought of:

Knowledge of other languages. The more (and the more varied) our experience of learning languages, the more internal resources we can draw on, even if the languages are not related.

Motivation. The type of motivation has been found to exert an influence. Integrative motivation is believed to lead to fuller mastery of a language than instrumental motivation.
Our **first language** exerts an influence, particularly in the early stages of learning. For example, British people assume that French is easier than Gaelic, since there are greater similarities between French and English, but would probably say that Gaelic is easier than Thai. However, these are the opinions of adult learners; children do not have such a strongly developed notion of 'them' and 'us'.

**Gender.** The effect is thought to be cultural rather than biological. Different cultures assign men and women different roles in public behaviour. For example, in Japan males tend to be louder, more extrovert and more economically dominant than females, but the opposite is true of the Ashanti in Ghana.

**Height.** Conceivably an indirect positive influence. In a large school class the shorter individuals might not be able to see the teacher and the board as well as the taller students!

**The amount of practice** affects learning; the more exposure to a language, the greater the chances of improvement. But the proverb *Practice makes perfect* is over-optimistic; on the other hand you are unlikely to achieve a strong command of a foreign language without a lot of practice.

Research suggests that **type of practice** has a more significant influence. Informal conversation with a sympathetic native speaker may provide a better basis for raising your language level than, say, watching TV, even if the amount of language you get from the television is greater.

The key thing is that for foreign language 'input' to be helpful it has to be comprehensible; a native speaker (or a competent non-native) is able in conversation to adjust what they say, and the way they say it, to match your comprehension level in order to make themselves understood.

**Personality.** No single personality factor has been shown to be the 'key' to success. Despite what many teachers believe, this is true even for extroversion. Allwright (1988) found that being an extrovert had a possibly negative effect on learning. The problem may be that extroverts are **poor listeners**; they talk a lot but are unwilling (or unable) to pay full attention to what the other people in the conversation are saying. Similarly, a study of Japanese learners of English in Japan (Busch 1982) found that introverts did relatively **better** than extroverts on tests of pronunciation, reading and grammar; it was only on an interview test that extroverts scored higher.

**Age** is discussed under **Task 1.6**

**Number of brothers and sisters** could have an indirect influence. If you are the
oldest of a large number of children you may get used to taking responsibility, organising your siblings and telling them what to do. This experience might have an overall effect on your social behaviour with other people outside the family, including how you participate in the language classroom. But it would be an indirect link.

**Intelligence** is famously difficult to define. It seems unlikely that (logical) intelligence is in itself an influence; not all the world's leading physicists, for example, are good at learning languages. But it is possible that intelligence plays a role as one element of **language aptitude**.

**Task 1.6**

**Age and foreign language learning**

*Some people think that the best time to begin studying a foreign language is in childhood, and that the younger you are, the easier it is to learn another language. There is little evidence, however, that children in language classrooms learn foreign languages any better than adults (people over age 15) in similar classroom situations. In fact, adults have many advantages over children: better memories, more efficient ways of organizing information, longer attention spans, better study habits, and greater ability to handle complex mental tasks. Adults are often better motivated than children: they see learning a foreign language as necessary for education or career. In addition, adults are particularly sensitive to correctness of grammar and appropriateness of vocabulary, two factors that receive attention in most language classrooms.*

(Rubin and Thompson 1982: 4)

As you can see, Rubin and Thompson don't accept Assumption 1. They mention seven advantages that adults should have over younger learners. Those have been underlined in the box.

**Task 1.7**

Below is Rubin and Thompson's next paragraph, this time with the disadvantages of age underlined. You will probably be able to think of others.
Age does have some disadvantages, however. For instance, adults usually want to learn a foreign language in a hurry, unlike children, who can devote more time to language mastery. Also, adults have more complex communication needs that extend beyond the mere ability to carry on a simple conversation. Adults need to be able to argue, persuade, express concern, object, explain, and present information about complex matters that pertain to their work or education. Because most adults do not like to appear foolish, they often deny themselves opportunities to practice for fear of making mistakes, not getting the message across, or appearing ridiculously incompetent. Also adults have more trouble than children in making new friends who speak the foreign language.

To go back to the study materials, click here

Tasks 1.8 and 1.9 are open questions.

Task 1.10

We think the overall figures are not surprising. There are 168 hours in a week; if we subtract 8 hours a night for sleep, that leaves 112 hours awake. So even a “full-time” course of 20 class hours per week would leave 92 hours potentially available outside the classroom. On that basis it is unsurprising that the students estimated that no more than 45% of their progress was due to teacher-led work. One might even say that 45% is quite a high figure, since the students were spending 4 to 5 times as many hours outside class as in their English classes.

Click here to go back to the unit materials.

Task 1.11

Your responses to this questionnaire are personal and individual, of course. You can use this initial assessment of your language needs to decide where to go next in these EEL materials. You can use the units in any order; they have been designed to be independent of each other.

Many students, in the early days and weeks of their studies at Edinburgh, feel that listening is a priority, which is why we have put it in EEL unit 2. But whether you go there next is entirely up to you.

Whichever EEL unit you visit next, we hope the ideas in this Preparation unit have got you thinking about what informal English learning involves. In the other units we highlight the practical opportunities open to international students on University of Edinburgh programmes.