

# Feeling Discouraged about English? Five Tips for Language Learners

June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020 By Elise Snaidero  
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Hey language learners!

Have you ever been concerned that you're not picking up North American English quickly enough? If this sounds familiar, don't panic! It's totally normal to feel discouraged sometimes, which is why I would like to share with you a few tips that I've learned along my language learning journey as an international student from France.



*Language learners in their English for Academic Purposes class – English Language Studies Program- Sheridan College, Winter 2019*

Speaking more than one language is a great asset in life. Even if it is challenging it will never be a waste of time. Perhaps it will be the reason an employer chooses to hire you from a group of short-listed candidates. In addition to this, if you choose to learn a language by studying abroad you have a wonderful opportunity to meet interesting people from around the world and grow both on an academic and personal level. This is indeed a great experience for us lucky ones who can choose this path.

Like you, I am an international student and I can tell that since I joined the ESL program and Public Relations at Sheridan College, my English has significantly improved. Of course, I'd be lying if I told you I haven't had any struggles along the way, but I have come to accept that this language learning journey is still ongoing. Moreover, learning a language is a process that never ends. Speaking for myself, I can tell I became a new person from this experience. This is something I often spoke about with one of my professors, Dr. Marlon Valencia, Professor of English as a Second Language at Sheridan. I vividly remember he once said to me that learning a second language could be a life-changing experience. This absolutely resonated with my own experiences since I feel I am no longer the same person who came to Canada over a year ago. However, I must add that no change comes without a challenge. As it happens with all challenges, we might find ourselves immersed in a roller coaster of emotions and the big question we should ask ourselves is: What can we do to overcome the dark moods coming from our language learning blues? I won't tell you that frustrations and doubts will entirely disappear, but with time, I've learned to face my challenges and grow from them.

So, if you are an international student or you are considering becoming one, here are five tips to help you when facing discouragement along your journey abroad. You might find this information useful to help motivate you and keep going, especially in these uncertain times of distance learning during a pandemic.

## **Tip 1: Stay focused on making your dreams come true and visualize yourself living those dreams – Ask yourself: What do you need English for?**

Sometimes people make drastic decisions to pursue their dreams. As many of us, you certainly have a good reason that motivated you to leave your home country to study abroad. When we think about it, English could be viewed as a tool that is helping us achieve our goals. While learning a second language can be frustrating, keep in mind that there is no secret formula to become fluent in English. It will come step by step. Again, becoming fluent should not necessarily be the end goal. As Dr. Valencia, explained to me, it all depends on what learners need to learn the language for, which may help them move forward.

As he said, an important question to ask ourselves to keep us grounded is “what do we see ourselves doing in the future in that language?” - Talking to pilots in an airport control tower? Writing academic articles for scientific journals? Having informal conversations with people?

Take five minutes of your time and really think about it. Once you are clear with what you need the language for, you can identify the method that works best for you. After that, you should never keep your goal out of sight.

## **Tip 2: Allow yourself to make mistakes and give yourself room to improve**

We all make mistakes. As someone who has learned two additional languages (English and Spanish), I have experienced a bunch of awkward and embarrassing moments after botching a phrase or sentence. You know what I'm talking about, right? Misspelling, wrong pronunciation, errors in verb conjugation, etc.

I remember one day, I was speaking Spanish with a friend, and I literally said, 'I fart' instead of 'I ask.' I realized my mistake after my friend laughed, amused by this simple confusion with my verb conjugation. Sometimes your lack of knowledge will betray you, and that's OK. It's all part of learning. It still happens to me in English and Spanish and I'm cool with it. The good thing is that when I mess up, I'm more likely not to make the same mistake twice. Embarrassment can be turned into a fun learning experience and it may help create good/fun memories. Don't be afraid to take risks!

Also, the desire to sound exactly like a native speaker can make your fear of making mistakes worse. Keep in mind that errors are part of improvement. Adding to that, Dr. in one of our many conversations, Dr. Valencia also told me, “if they want to succeed, learners must feel comfortable using the language, and they must keep in mind that this is a process.”

No matter how you feel about speaking in English or if you like your accent or not, take risks and don't be afraid to interact with others. Then, step by step you'll become more confident speaking.

## **Tip 3: The problem is not where you're going, but what you're leaving behind**

Have you ever compared the way you interact in English with how you do it in your native language? How did you feel about it? Most of the time it is frustrating because it feels unnatural; like we are not completely ourselves.

Socializing in groups is never easy at the beginning. Maybe it happens that you feel nobody could really know who you are because you can't express yourself the way you want. Nevertheless, it is definitely possible to have deep connections with people even with little vocabulary. Also keep in mind that there are things that cannot be translated or said the same way we do in our mother tongue.

I had to learn to give up the idea of being a French version of myself in English. Instead, I tried to discover a new part of who I am through this new language and learn to become familiar with it.

Dr. Valencia says that the questions of interacting with others in a new language or country are questions of identity. By that, he means how we see ourselves, how we perceive ourselves, and how others see us. "I see identity as a central part of the language teaching and learning processes," he says; "The process of immigrating to a new country or joining a new community is never easy and could be a humbling experience." Thus, learning a new language is more than a skill, it is a question of identity.

## Tip 4: Don't question yourself, question your knowledge

Have you ever been frustrated because you felt that a child speaks better English than you? Well, that might be true at times, but it does not change the extraordinary person that you are. I know some of us may struggle to accept our accent, thinking that it can be a barrier between us and native speakers. This is why I would recommend listening to an interesting podcast ([click here for the hyperlink](#)) from CBC radio, which provides insightful reflections on how the way we speak affects ourselves. This podcast also highlights the fact that one of the common fears of people with an accent -different to the dominant local accent- is to be perceived as less capable than they really are.

It is not uncommon to feel that way though. Dr. Valencia says that we tend to judge ourselves harder in our additional languages than we do in our first language. "This is why many times we may feel inadequate when using that additional language and we might feel we don't own it or have a legitimate voice in it," he says.

There is no magic trick to turn you into a competent user of English in one night. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to know how to separate performance and self-esteem. Having this in mind, I must stress that being kind and patient with yourself will be key to facing discouragement with language learning.

## Tip 5: Be patient, it may take time, but you will see the results

Learning a new language is like gardening. You must be willing to put in some effort and be patient if you want to see results. Since we learned how to communicate when we were children, we never stopped learning and developing our language skills. Even after years of speaking French I cannot pretend I master it perfectly. A language is alive, and we must always acknowledge that we will continue to learn it. Therefore, when we learn a new language, it could feel in many ways like we are pretty much asking our brain to abandon everything it knows and telling it to go through that process again. Yes, it is going to take time, but remember you will see the results of your efforts along the way.

*"Good things come to those who wait" - Violet Fane (1843-1905)*

To conclude, my friends, remember that today you are walking towards this amazing future you have pictured in your head. Studying abroad is not easy, but you have jumped into this great adventure and I am proud of you. Be proud of yourself too. All the sacrifices and hard work you make will pay off.

I know you will walk away from this experience smarter, more able to adapt yourself to new environments and more confident to overcome challenges.



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