



TIPS FOR ESL STUDENTS: MAKING GOOD USE OF THE READING COURSE

Below are some common experiences reported by Reading Course students for whom English is not a native language as well as some strategies that might help you to make good use of the course despite the challenges of reading English. Although these strategies refer mostly to your work in the Reading Course, they apply equally well to your regular courses.

“Everything is going too fast.” You might feel like the films, readings, or exercises in the Reading Course are going too quickly for you. The Reading Course is challenging for native English speakers, and would be challenging for you in your own language – so it can feel *additionally* challenging to take the course in English as an ESL student. Even though the Reading Course will not be a solution to all of your reading and learning challenges, most ESL students find the course’s strategies very helpful.

The best approach is to 1) be open to experimenting, 2) try to be patient, and 3) actively engage in the course activities even if you feel the course is going too fast and you are missing a lot. Generally, it is okay if you don't have time to complete the exercises, as long as you feel you have gotten the main point of them and can continue to experiment later at your own pace. Improvement is often gradual, and you'll notice it more at the end of the course than in the middle of it. By the end of the Reading course, many ESL students report enjoying and benefiting from films or exercises that they felt were going too fast earlier in the course.

“There are too many words I don't know.” Students frequently ask, “When should I look up an unfamiliar word or concept I don't understand? It slows me down.” This is a dilemma for all students, but it's a special challenge when English is not your native language or a subject is very new to you.

If you cannot understand the meaning of an English word in context, it often makes sense to look it up, just as you would in your native language. One helpful technique is to write definitions of new words on small sticky note labels that you place near the word, so you can see the context and definition of the word at the same time.¹

However, in a fast-paced classroom or with limited time for your studying, it is not practical to think that you can look up every word you don't know. So it is worth trying to figure out whether you really need to look up a word to make sense of the sentence or achieve your purpose. Can you obtain the meaning from the context alone? Is this word *crucial* to your understanding, given your purpose for reading this particular text? One idea is to place a sticky note near a word you don't know but to keep reading without looking up the word. If you read on and find that you understand what you are reading even without knowing the precise definition, you don't need to look up that word. If you read on and find that your understanding of the reading depends upon your knowing that word, then you can go back and look it up.

¹ M.J. Drucker, “What Reading Teachers Should Know about ESL Learners,” *The Reading Teacher* 57 (2003): 27.

As a student, you will often read different texts about the same subject matter, which present you with repeated exposure to new words; eventually, these words become naturally integrated into your learned vocabulary.² Anything you can do to actively use new words – write them, speak them, use them in new sentences – will improve your memory and mastery.

Usually, after interacting with their course materials for a while, students find a good balance among looking up words, figuring them out from the context, and allowing understanding to emerge from repeated exposure. The more you read in a foreign language and the more you actively practice using new vocabulary, the better your language skills will become!

“I need help now – I don’t have time to explore and experiment.” If you enrolled in the Reading Course for help *right now* with your current studies, you might find that you don’t improve as quickly as you’d like. Most students, both English-speaking and ESL, worry about their academic progress and performance, and would like to do better. One helpful approach is to focus more on those Reading Course strategies that you feel will be most useful to your work right now, given the type of work you are doing, and focus less on strategies that seem less relevant to your current priorities. It can also be comforting to recognize that skill-building and language proficiency are by nature long-term processes rather than quick fixes.

“It’s not just the vocabulary – the whole feeling of English writing seems very foreign to me.” Many of the strategies discussed in the Reading Course are oriented towards the particular structure of English composition. For example, the conclusions in an English-language article are often placed at the end rather than stated at the beginning, while in other languages, the author’s conclusion or argument might be presented differently. Similarly, English writers are often very explicit about their arguments, while in other languages such an approach might be considered artless or crude. The Reading Course will help you understand these typical forms of English language writing so that you can get a better feel for your assigned reading. Some students find it helpful to sit down and to compare the structure of English language texts to ones in their native language, to better articulate and understand the differences.

“The Reading Course texts are too difficult/easy/irrelevant for me.” If the texts provided in the Reading Course seem very different from the reading you have to do in your regular courses, you are welcome to bring your own texts to class and substitute them whenever it seems appropriate. If you feel that your English is not sufficient to understand the texts used in the Reading Course, you can try some of the strategies on texts in your native language first, and then experiment with how to apply them to texts in English. The purpose of the texts used in the Reading Course is to provide you with an opportunity to practice various reading approaches, and if you can practice more easily with a different text, that is fine.

NOTE: The guide is largely based on “Making the Best Use of the Course: Some Common Challenges and Strategies” developed by Claire Shindler. Thanks to Gingle Lee, HGSE Graduate Intern, for her work in further developing this study guide.

² Ibid.