Improving Second Language Fluency

Fluency is the ability to use a language quickly and smoothly and communicate ideas effectively. Sometimes students put too much focus on accuracy - grammar, sentence structure, and word choice. This causes 3 main problems:

1. Reading and writing takes longer, usually because of translating or from worrying about every single word. This slowness can be caused by using translation from a first language or from stopping and worrying about the correctness of every word that is used.

2. You will lose the meaning if you focus too much on accuracy. The ideas of writing or reading get lost because your focus is on correctness instead of on communicating ideas.

3. You won't improve very quickly. Over-reliance on dictionaries (especially bilingual dictionaries) and grammar rules means less time practicing using the language.

Approach to Language Learning

If you want to learn a second language efficiently, you should:

- Use the language as much as possible.
  - Listen, speak, read and write a lot!
  - Practice when you are not in class or doing homework by volunteering, participating in college or community programs/clubs, and going to places where the language is used.

- Don't be afraid to guess or to make mistakes. Mistakes are part of the language learning process.

- Accept that you won't always understand everything perfectly. Focus on the main ideas of something first.
Here are some other approaches you should try:

**Think Positively about Your Knowledge**

- Focus on what you *can* do or understand, not what you can’t.
- **Writing/Speaking**: Focus on what you know and what ideas you can express clearly. Do not punish yourself for making mistakes. Mistakes are part of learning.
- **Reading/Listening**: Concentrate on what you can understand. Often, you do not need all the information to understand. Many details are unimportant.

**Think in that language**

Many students find it difficult to think in another language. Try to say the sentences that you are reading or are going to write in your head.

**Use the language to learn it**

- Avoid using your native language as the bridge to learning a second language because this will slow down the language learning process.
- Always use a monolingual dictionary first. Try to get a basic understanding of the word in that language. You will understand it better when you see it again.

**Use the Words You Know**

- When reading, try to guess the meanings of words you don’t know from the context of the words around it that you do know.
- Write about ideas using the words you are already comfortable with. You can try to add in fancier words later. Focus on ideas while you’re writing.

*(Check out the Learning Centre handout “Understanding Vocabulary in Context” for more help.)*

**Keep Rules in their Place**

- Many aspects of languages cannot be explained by rules. A lot of language learning involves learning how language is used by people. Too much emphasis on rules and grammar exercises can hold back the development of your fluency.*