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Removing obstacles to your English study

Let's look at what could hold you back in learning English — the obstacles you may encounter. Of course, time to study and good resources are vital, but let's assume these are available. Here we'll consider the less obvious. As every boxer knows, "It's the punch you don't see that knocks you out."

Perhaps looking at obstacles seems to be dwelling on the negative, and indeed, focusing on the negative can undermine confidence and stall you. However, failing to recognize obstacles for what they are — or denying them — will stunt your progress. Therefore, to be effective and keep strong forward momentum in learning English, we'll try to turn each of the following negative "obstacles" into a positive to focus on. All are normal and very human, albeit some can vary in strength from culture to culture.

1) Demotivating motivation

Let's get this one out of the way first. How strong is your motivation to learn English? Do you really want to become fluent? Or is your school, your company, or something else pressuring you to do so. Sometimes such stressful "motivation" can subconsciously lead to allowing failure to happen to prove that your negative presumptions about learning English were right. The suggestions given here are for those who ARE truly and positively motivated to learn a foreign language. If necessary, reconsider your motivation and reshape it to provide you with a strong positive incentive. For example, you might nurture in yourself a genuine interest in English communication through passion for something like media, literature, travel, music, movies, food, sports, or technology. The possibilities are boundless, and whatever you choose is likely to be personal.

2) Belief in magic

Many believe that those skilled in foreign languages somehow got that way easily. Realize and accept that mastering a foreign language is truly hard work requiring significant time and concentrated effort. Schedule regular study every day and stick to it. Constantly challenge yourself and check your progress by creating situations requiring you to use English.

3) Resistance to change

Your native language is an integral part of your personality and ego — it's part of who you are. *Really* learning and using a foreign language, with all its very different sounds and expressions, can be felt as a threat to your identity. Language is cultural, and communicating well in another language requires you to "let go" and open yourself to

another culture and its way of thinking and living. This can be very scary and lead to a so-called *kokoro no kabe* — an emotional and/or mental block to learning.

Nurture a hunger for the new and different. Be flexible and ready to leave behind your native language persona. When you study a foreign language, you're taking on a new identity, becoming a new person. Yes, it can feel a bit scary, but it can also be very liberating — you'll be expressing yourself in ways you never did before.

4) Failure to start with sound

All language starts with sound, and each language has its own unique set. Humans spoke long before they could read and write. You'll never master any language with just the written word and pronunciation symbols — and certainly not by transliterating the sounds of a foreign language into those of your own language. This is where much of traditional foreign language learning in Japan falls short. It ignores the sounds — often attempting to reproduce them with *katakana* — and focuses on the written. Make mastering the sounds of English your first priority — and *never* use *katakana* to pronounce English words.

5) Failure to involve the entire brain

Your brain remembers best by integrating its entire neural network. It does not store a memory in just one location. Use as much of it as you can to learn and recall English and you will retain much more. This is particularly important for speaking and listening. Simply studying the old academic way trying to memorize language with books and CDs is not very effective. Involve all five of your senses, add emotion, drama, gestures, facial expressions, and movement. Simulate situations as realistically as possible.

6) Failure to review methodically

Review is absolutely essential to master a foreign language. Studying something once is never enough. Review regularly and often. And enhance each review to add something new to the experience — thereby improving retention. Don't review only with exactly the same material as before — add media for example.

7) Failure to "see the forest for the trees"

Micromanaging your English by giving constant meticulous attention to detail in the pursuit of perfection can impede your ability to communicate. Yes, when you're studying for a test, or mastering calligraphy, or doing math, or submitting an article to a journal, such attention to detail is essential. But in

verbal communication "Perfect is the enemy of good!" Insisting on perfection will hold you back.

8) Risk aversion and fear of mistakes

Similarly, the fear of making mistakes leads to avoiding risk. It's natural to want to stay in a safe place avoiding danger, but as learning to swim requires entering the water, mastering English communication requires "jumping into the pool" — and you don't have to worry about drowning! Make mistakes — lots of them — and learn from them. You can only learn what works and doesn't work by trying it out. Afterwards, take a few minutes to take notes on what went well and what didn't, and what you should work on to improve. So muster up the courage to jump into the conversation, and mistakes be damned!

9) Fear of or oversensitivity to correction

You're going to make mistakes constantly. They will become fewer and fewer over time, but you'll never be perfect. A native speaker who will astutely correct your English is worth their weight in gold. Don't avoid or denounce correction. Encourage it and show your appreciation. By no means should you ever become upset at the person attempting to help you — you will discourage them from trying to help you again. "Once bitten, twice shy!"

10) Absence of a supportive community

Mom was right when she told you to beware of the company you keep. Carefully choose those you spend your time with. Avoid naysayers and those who will not positively support you in your pursuit of English fluency. They *will* hold you back. Realize they may not appreciate, or even approve of your increasing English skill and how you may have changed thanks to it — it could be perceived as a threat, or even as cultural betrayal.

Seek out and surround yourself with likeminded others who are successfully learning to communicate in English — and preferably who are better than yourself.

As you become more and more comfortable communicating in English, you will awake to new worlds and possibilities. You will grow and change — and your social life must grow and change with your progress. At *English Now!*, you can meet many just like yourself who are working hard at advancing their English skills to really become able to communicate meaningfully in English.

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