A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a silver laptop on a wooden desk. The laptop has a custom keyboard with dark blue and black keys. A pair of black headphones with red accents is resting on the desk next to the laptop. The background is out of focus, showing a wooden surface and some indistinct shapes.

No Teacher Required, Why you should stay out of the classroom if you want to be a fluent English speaker.....

By Kevin A Dean
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No teacher required!

Why you should stay out of the classroom if you want to be a fluent English speaker...

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Foreword: a slight caveat

Seeing the title of this book, you may think it somewhat strange that an English teacher, someone who makes his living from giving lessons, may say that to reach English fluency there is “No teacher required!”. What I mean is that, from personal experience, and anecdotal evidence from many students, I have ineluctably come to the conclusion that the usual, traditional, teacher-centric, classroom based method of teaching English simply does not work for most people. So it is not really that “no teacher is required” although that may be true to some degree, what I really mean is that “no classroom is required”. Of course, as with all things in life, there are exceptions, I know that some, not very many, people do learn English successfully in the classroom, and indeed, for lower abilities, such as in an absolute beginner class this method can be effective for teaching the bare bones of English. Saying this, a lot depends on the teacher and how they arrange their lessons, the methods they use, the approach they take, etc.

This being said, I still tend to think, knowing what I do, that the people who were successful in being able to speak fluent English managed this despite the classroom, not because of it. These learners had the mindset, the drive, and the will to take other measures besides the classroom, and therefore achieved their language aims. So, as you read on you will see how I state my position and I hope you will be convinced by it, and take the steps I recommend to reach your personal language goals.

But to return to the caveat, and to clarify my meaning here, I am not claiming that teachers are not required by any student, at any level, in any context. I am merely saying that the way the classroom operates more often than not fails to meet the needs of the students within it. If your aim is fluency, which I imagine it must be, or you wouldn't be reading this, then my recommendation is to practice your speaking in real life situations as often as possible, not to study endless grammatical texts, etc. For example, I advocate finding language partners online (or in person) who you can practice with and develop your fluency, however, as we know, not every “native” speaker of English is qualified to explain how their language works, nor to correct any grammatical, syntactical, or vocabulary mistakes you may make. I know many “native” speakers of English who can barely string a sentence together, hardly the kind of partner you need to be practising with, but in terms of fluency, it is the act of speaking, and speaking regularly, that will help you in your goal.

And of course for specific tasks, not fluency as such, like exam preparation (IELTS, TOEFL, CAE, etc) writing, university applications, personal statements, essays, and other things, you will still need a “teacher”. Someone who can maybe not “teach” you in the traditional sense, but can certainly guide, coach, and advise you on these technical aspects of English. In this meaning, the role of the “teacher” is not yet obsolete, even if the method of delivery (the classroom) is.

However, as you will read below, my claim is that the traditional teacher-centric method of teaching someone to be a fluent speaker is inadequate for the job, and that the best way is for the learner to take charge of their own learning, by practising the vital actual skill of speaking, by speaking, not by reading, not by reciting grammar rules, but by the physical act of conversation with another human being. For more details, read on...

Introduction: traditional methods don't work!

If you are reading this book then it's possible you are one of the many English learners who have tried, and failed, maybe several times, to achieve fluency in English. Maybe you started to learn English at school or college, maybe you took some courses or private lessons, maybe you have tried online lessons, and yet, you still are not happy with your English. You are not a fluent speaker of English. Why is this? Maybe it's you, maybe you can't commit to a regular programme of study, perhaps you are lazy, nothing wrong in that, a lot of us are. This is a separate issue which I shall not concentrate on here, although motivation is a definite factor in explaining a persons language success, or lack of it. However, to return to my point, if you have been attending regular lessons at a language school, maybe for some time, and you still can't speak English fluently, then it's possible there is another reason, that traditional classroom teaching methods for English do not work for a majority of learners.

The reason why most classroom based English language courses fail is quite simple. And when I say fail, I mean that most of the participants in a typical language school course, after the course has finished, often see no noticeable change in their English speaking ability. There may be several reasons why this method did not work for them. One reason lies in the methodology underlying the schools teaching practice. As you may know, if you have ever taken such a course is that many company's insist upon their teachers using certain books, and ways of classroom teaching, etc, which is standard practice in this industry. For make no mistake about it, that is what English teaching is, in whatever context, an industry. If you think about it, it can be nothing else, if language schools use industrial methods in their business model, then it is de facto, an industry. It is nothing but a manifestation of "Fordism" (the production line approach to manufacture named after Henry Ford, the car maker).

What do I mean by this? Well, if you sign up for a language school, what happens? They (should) give you a level test, then they put you into a group of (hopefully) learners of a similar ability. Say you begin as a beginner, you work through all the units of the beginner course book, take a test at the end, then you are pronounced, pre-intermediate, and signed up for the next level. The same thing again, you work through the pre-intermediate coursebook, take the final exam, etc. Repeat til advanced. As one class moves on, another comes in, ad infinitum. How is this different from a production line?

There are many reasons for this approach, the first is possibly that it mimics the way that many people were taught their first language at school, which could well play to some peoples expectations of what and how “learning” is. Another reason lies in the old retail idea of “pile ’em high and sell ’em cheap”, get as many bodies into the class as possible, pay the teacher peanuts, and reap the profits. However, as many of my current online students have told me (purely anecdotal evidence, I admit), this method did not work for them. In some cases they have been attempting to reach their English language goals of fluency or whatever, for some years, first by being “taught” English at school and then later by taking the language school courses I .

As I mentioned above, we can speculate why this method was ineffective. One is that it fails to recognise the difference between learners as individuals, different learners have different learning styles, tactile, auditory, etc, and have different motivations, different thresholds of boredom, amongst other factors. Another (possibly the main) reason is the theoretical approach to “teaching” that lies behind this method, that drilling, grammar translation, rote learning, are more valid than actual using and speaking the language, which is why most schools schools these days profess adherence to the “communicative” or “student centred” model of teaching (which is what all teaching should be really).

An obvious point to make here is that, even if the “communicative” method is being utilised to maximise student talking time, in a classroom of 6, 8, 10, 12, learners, the actual amount of speaking practice they will get is extremely limited, especially if the teacher is lecturing them on grammar rules or whatever most of the time. Again, this is the main reason (apart from that of convenience) that persuades students to seek language partners/teachers on the internet to help them, which is to gain a significant increase in their speaking time.

Why it doesn't work.

Let's think about how the process of learning to speak another language actually works. If we consider how human beings speak any language, we use the brain for memory and the coordination of speech, we listen to get the pronunciation of the new words, and our mouths (lips, teeth, tongue, etc) are naturally used for making and reproducing the correct sounds of that language. So, in order to learn and to speak in a second (or third, fourth) language, we need to retrain these three components of the body.

The brain is used to remember the new vocabulary, syntax, and grammar, the “rules” of the language, and also remember (muscle memory) the numerous different positions and movements of all parts of the mouth to produce one intelligible word, let alone the myriad of memories it needs to produce an adequate sentence.

The physical components of the system which actually make the sounds are the mouth, vocal cords, and the lungs. This is straightforward enough to grasp, we know where the sounds are produced.

The ears act as a monitoring system to give our brain feedback and tell us if we are making the right sounds for the right words, the brain processes this information and makes adjustments in the delivery system (mouth) accordingly.

When we are children, this comes relatively easily to most people, it is a simple matter for children to copy or mimic the sounds of a new language. For this reason, anecdotal evidence tells us that children from birth to around a certain age (usually 6 or 7) have no real problems in becoming bilingual with enough exposure. If each parent speaks a different language for example. This natural ability tends to drop away after this age, although of course there are exceptions for linguistically gifted individuals.

However, as adults, as this natural ability has disappeared, it is much harder for adult learners of a second language to mimic the speech of other nationalities unless you have special training, as an actor might for example. As adults, we need to retrain our brain, ears, and mouth in order to speak another language, which as you will have found is not an easy matter.

So, to return to my claim that traditional classroom English teaching is ineffective, we need to consider what happens in the classroom and what ESL actually teaches.

The first obvious thing that it teaches, if you think back to your own classroom experience, is vocabulary and the rules of grammar. Usually, a lot of grammar. This is in part based upon the old “Grammar Translation” method, derived from the classical method of how foreign languages used to be taught, maybe this was your experience. The teacher sets you a text and you basically compare and analyse the differences between the two languages, your native tongue and English. This is why many students in some parts of the world where this method is practised (and I can say China, from my own experience) have an excellent knowledge of English grammar, far better than most “native” speakers. Yet can they string a sentence together? Usually not!...

Also, if writing is taught in the classroom, and it should be, as all four skills need to be utilised to have a good working knowledge of the language. If you think back to being taught your native language at school, the teacher spoke, you wrote things down, you read and spoke, etc. So, writing in English teaches visual memory, which is also a good memory aid and a guide to syntax, sentence construction, etc. This is all well and good, but does it aid you when you have to speak in English? Not really.

So, once again, the main point here is (as I mentioned above) that the traditional classroom typically gives so little student talking time (STT as it is known by teachers) that it fails to train or retrain I should say, the mouth to actually produce intelligible spoken English.

We can intuitively see how this claim measures up from our own experience, mine as a teacher (and also a student), and yours as a student. From my teaching experience in classrooms in Istanbul and Beijing, even though I deliberately tried to encourage every student to speak, and not everyone did or wanted to, there was simply not enough time for everyone to get more than 5 mins or so speaking practice in a typical one hour lesson. As is always the case, unless the teacher is careful, there are some students who tend to (or try to) dominate the conversation and take up most of the speaking time available, which considering the numbers of students in the class, will always mean that some students lose out.

The last time I was at university, a few years ago, I enrolled in a Mandarin class mainly to see how it looked from the other side of the fence. To improve and inform my teaching practice, I wanted to experience life as a student in such a classroom, make comparisons, etc. We had 30 or so learners in the class, and as I expected, speaking time was minimal and was reduced to choral drills and rote recitation of fixed lexical phrases, mostly in pairs with the other students. Much as my own students

complained about in their experience. The reason for their complaints are valid, ESL taught in this way cannot teach them English as it doesn't adequately teach all of the essential components needed for fluent English speech.

What does work? A method for you to take charge of your own English learning!

So, as you have read, traditional methods of teaching English as regards fluency, the ability to actually speak in English, are falling short of their target. Where does this leave you then, as a person who wants to become a fluent English speaker? It leaves you to become an independent English learner. What do I mean by this? I mean that you will be an autonomous learner, one who takes charge of their own learning, using the materials you want, and speaking to who you want to speak to, about whatever you like.

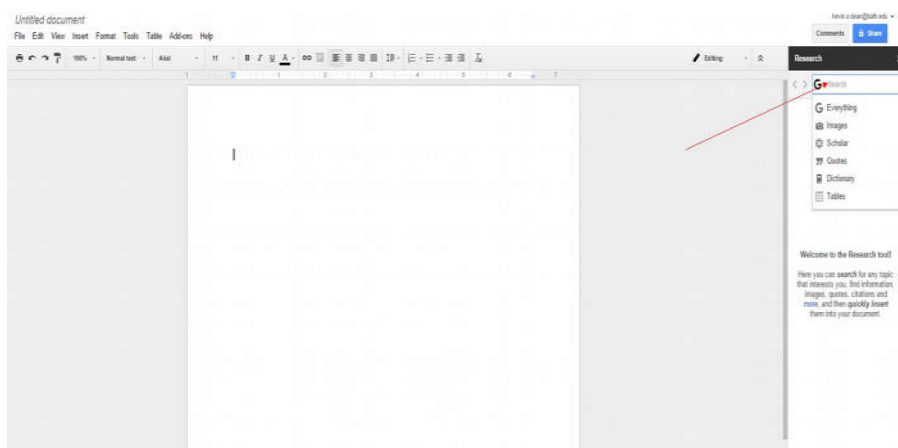
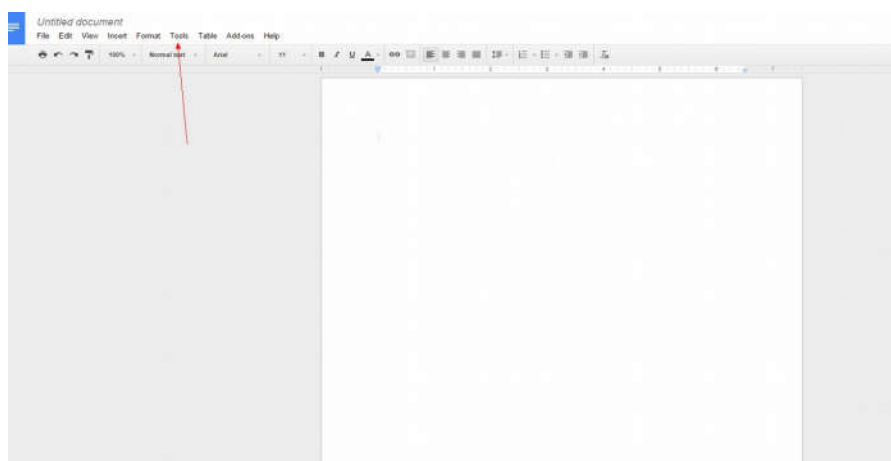
To supply you with more anecdotal evidence, I have found that the learner who takes charge of their study, whether it be English or anything else, tends to be the one who is the most motivated, and the one most likely to succeed in their aims. I am sure you can think of many successful people you know or have heard of who are like this, whether in business or in life, the self driven individual who takes their own risks, and doesn't wait to be told what to do, are the ones who achieve success.

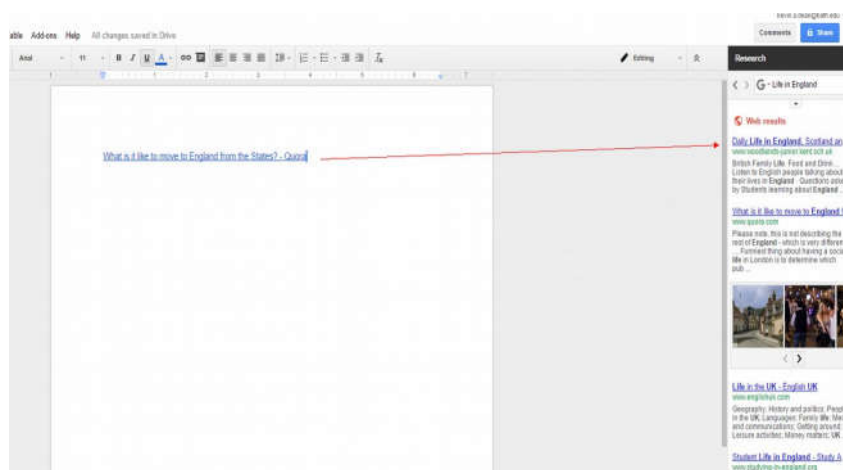
I know this is a little vague so far, so let me put some meat on the bones of this, as it were. The aim is fluency, the ability to speak without undue hesitation and pausing, to achieve this, you need as much speaking time as you can manage. Classroom based courses don't work, so therefore you need to step outside them (both literally and metaphorically). What you are going to do, if you follow my method, is to have as many conversations as possible with people on the internet, (although you can meet in person and I will say more about that later) you will prepare for the conversation in advance, read, watch, gather your own resources from the internet, practice what you intend to say, then say it, record every session, based on upon the same topic and language. This will improve your confidence, by listening to the recordings afterwards you can see what needs to improve for the next time, and also by preparing in advance, you will have a framework of what to and how to say it. As you see then, preparation is key.

What you need to then, is to decide what you want to talk about and prepare some materials in advance. Then when you are speaking to your partner you will know exactly what to say. I suggest that you choose the areas where you think you need improvement and think of some topics which will allow you to use that language. One or two hours of preparation should be sufficient for your purpose, depending on how long you plan to be speaking of course, the more preparation the better,

naturally. You can search the net on YouTube, Google, Facebook, or any site you please, and find videos and text to watch/read beforehand. Make notes of any new vocabulary for the topic, any fixed phrases you find in the materials, and think of a few open questions (ones that do not require a simple yes or no answer) to ask your partner.

You can copy and paste the links into a document in Word, or drag them directly into Google Docs. For Google Docs, open a new doc, click on Tools and Research and a search box will pop up at the right of the screen. Think of a topic, Life in England for example, then drag and drop the link into the doc. See below.





As you see from the pics, you will have lots of options for links to materials, you can even choose the level of English in the Web Results, Beginner, Intermediate, or Advanced. So if you play around with it a little, you can find videos, articles, anything really, you can study them for a few hours beforehand until you feel you are ready to start using the language you have discovered.

One more thing, I always recommend as a vital part of this process of self improvement, is to make audio recordings of every session that you have. This is good for several reasons, the first and most important is for you to listen and self correct, you can listen to your partner as many times as need be and copy their pronunciation, take note of any vocabulary or interesting expressions they use. Also, it serves as a powerful motivational tool, as you hear yourself making progress from session to session. There are several tools for this purpose, all freely available, such as [Audacity](#), [MP3 recorder for Skype](#), and many more.

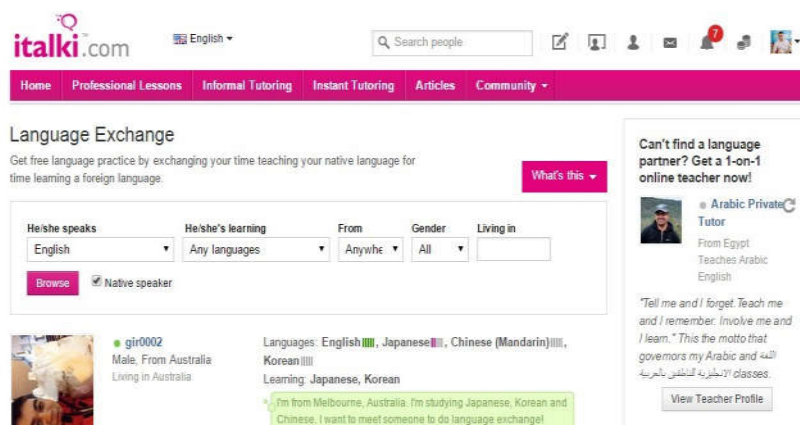
How to find your speaking partners?

Having outlined a method you can use to help you reach fluency, that is, by speaking to partners online, for as we have seen, listening and reading alone will do next to nothing to help in this regard, the next part is, where to find such a partner?

So, I would like to recommend several websites where you can find, and practice with, native speakers of English, using some kind of VOIP such as Skype, QQ, Hangouts, or whatever. Most of these sites are for language exchange, where you share your native tongue in exchange for help and practice in English. What you do is to register, create a profile, then you can search for partners by language and/or location, you contact them, and wait for a response. Now, this first contact is important, if you come across as too needy or too demanding, no one will want to talk to you. The key here is exchange, offer something first. The language you use is vital to making a good first impression, (“Hello, my name is...., I speak, I was wondering if you might like to have a chat sometime in....and English, I would really like to talk to you if possible. Maybe we can set a time if convenient, etc”) you get the idea. Polite and to the point. Also, as I mentioned above, you need to make sure you are well prepared for your conversation and have some questions/topics to talk about so as not to waste anyone's time.

So let's see what's available.

My top tip is www.italki.com, although they have professional and community teachers, more importantly for your purpose, they have many people looking for language partners. If you wish, you can join in the discussions, post and answer questions, etc, as well as finding partners. All in all, a very useful site.



I won't say too much about these next choices, but I have used and can recommend them all. They all have a slightly different way of working but you can check them out and see which one/s suit you best. The idea is still the same, create a profile, make contact, then using your prepared materials, start speaking.

- 1) www.busuu.com
- 2) www.polyglotclub.com
- 3) <http://livemocha.com/>
- 4) www.mylanguageexchange.com
- 5) www.conversationexchange.com

As I wrote above, although I recommend finding partners on the internet, which for most of you will be the best option. maybe because of time constraints, convenience, or the difficulty of finding speaking opportunities where you live, there are a number of websites where you can find people or groups of people to meet in person and practice your English that way. Of course, this does depend upon whereabouts you live, if you live in a capital or a major city, then you should be able to find some of the groups I shall mention. If not, then the above mentioned websites will have to serve. One thing I should say, some but not all of these groups are for language exchange, others may just be ex-pat meetings where the common language will be English, which doesn't really matter as it will suit your purpose either way..

- 1) My personal favourite of these meet up sites is www.meetup.com, you can usually find them in most capitals around the world, where people share a variety of interests. I have one here in Prague, “Prague English Meetup”, every Wednesday we meet in a central location and lots of people come along for English practice, make new friends, etc.
- 2) Another very popular site you may know of is www.couchsurfing.com, which is the site for hosting travellers, etc, but who also hold meetups and all kinds of activities around the world and the common language is usually always English.
- 3) You can also try <http://polyglotclub.com/> which is just for language exchange.
- 4) Or www.internations.org which is an expat professional networking site, but again where the de facto language is English.

So there you are, as you see there are opportunities for both online and face to face speaking practice. I recommend that, if possible, you take advantage of both of them. The online and offline settings can act as a very good complement to one another and if they help you reach your fluency goals, then so much the better.

Summary

So, to conclude, as I have written, the best way to improve your speaking ability is by speaking. This is not really surprising is it, not in any sense, the best way to get better at doing something, anything, to improve any skill, is by practising it. Unfortunately, if you take a traditional, classroom based English course the chances are you won't be getting a lot of speaking time at all in most cases. To remedy this, as I have outlined above, you need to be your own “teacher”, you need to make your own chances for speaking time. It may seem difficult and awkward at first, but I promise, as with most things it will become easier over time as your confidence grows, and you can hear and feel the improvement you are making in becoming a fluent speaker.

Finally, I would like to say, stay focused, stay motivated, and if you have any doubts about why you are improving your English then just think of how your life would be different (hopefully better) if you could speak English with fluency and confidence. Think of how things might be and keep at it. I wish you luck in your endeavours.



About the author.

Hi, I hope you have enjoyed reading this guide to English fluency and that you find the materials I suggest to be useful in your English study. In case you don't know, let me tell you something about myself, my name is Kevin A Dean and I am a native English teacher currently living in Prague, Czech Republic although I have lived and taught in Turkey, China, Hungary before I came to Prague. I have taught groups, both large and small, one to one lessons, dealing with general English, Business English and exam courses, such as, IELTS, TOEFL, CAE, etc..

Now up until about a year ago I had never given any English lessons online, I had always worked for language schools or companies and given private face to face lessons. My online “journey” began when a company I worked for in Budapest asked me to use their internet platform to give a lesson, I tried it and it was interesting but I thought no more about it. Later, as I was asked to do more of these kind of classes I began to see the potential of the internet for English teaching and education in general. In particular, for me I could see the potential of working independently, setting my own rates, deciding who or what I would teach, and when.

Then later when I moved to Prague, and started my own business “Learn English Prague”, I became tired of chasing all over town to meet students and I began the transition from “off-line” to online teaching. I started by joining the popular platforms, italki.com and verbling.com, where I still have a profile by the way. Overtime, my online profile grew and I stopped teaching in person in Prague and moved 100 per cent to online lessons and courses. After a while I realised my personal knack or “niche” was for teaching, or coaching, for examinations, the IELTS in particular, which is what I mainly do nowadays.

In sum, I can say I have helped many students around the world achieve their language goals, whether it was to get a good score on the IELTS, take an interview in English, help them write their personal statement for university, or to help with Business English when talking to foreign customers. I really love teaching English as I can see the very real difference I can help people make to their lives; this is my motivation for being a teacher. I am a firm believer in the power of education to make a difference in the world and I hope to be able to help you too as far as I can.

After all, my motto is "ipsa scientia potestas est"Knowledge in itself is power!

I've taught you
Everything I Know.
Now you Know
Nothing!