



**ienglish**

LIFE IS THE CLASSROOM - IMMERSE YOURSELF

## STRATEGIES: **IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEAS** >> transcript

**Rebecca:**

I see you brought it. I'm so excited.

**Terry:**

Yes, I'm teaching you how to play chess today. I love this game. It's a great strategy game.

Strategies are plans, methods and techniques that help you accomplish your task successfully. In the case of Chess, the goal is to capture your opponent's king – checkmate!

Learning English is like playing Chess. You'll be more successful if you have the right learning strategies.

iEnglish is the program that teaches you those strategies.

**Rebecca:**

In fact, iEnglish presents two groups of strategies. We call the first group - "behind the scenes" strategies. These are learning strategies that help you organize, plan and monitor your learning. All of our previous videos – the iLeap Cycle and the Notebook pages – have focussed on behind-the-scenes strategies.

But today, in this episode, we begin presenting a new group of strategies that we call "spotlight" strategies.

**Terry:**

The best way to understand this is to consider a stage play.

Think about all the people working "behind the scenes," - directing the actors, designing the set, creating the props, making the wardrobe – they make sure that everything is in place for those actors to then walk out on stage and perform. Behind-the-scenes strategies set the stage for your learning.

The iLEAP cycle and the Notebook pages contain these strategies – together, it is a system for learning English on your own.

**Rebecca:**

Well now it's time for the "spotlight" strategies. These are like the actors on stage, "in the spotlight." Spotlight strategies focus on the language directly. They help you shine a light on specific language while you perform the four skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing.

**Terry:**

These strategies help you discover, identify, remember, and use new language in real-life situations. We are going to be looking at 8 "spotlight" strategies. They are:

1. identifying main ideas

**Rebecca:**

2. guessing by looking at clues

**Terry:**

3. repeating



Rebecca:

4. grouping

Terry:

5. associating

Rebecca:

6. decoding patterns & rules

Terry:

7. writing for purpose and people

Rebecca:

8. managing the conversation

In this episode, we start with "identifying main ideas."

Terry:

Language skills can be compared to the two pedals on a bike. Both pedals are needed to move forward in the world of English. On one pedal we have reading and listening. We call reading and listening receptive skills because through them we "receive" language. The other pedal is writing and speaking – these are productive skills. With these we express our thoughts to others. This video and the next one are mainly focussed on the receptive skills – listening and reading.

And one of the most important listening and reading strategies is "identifying main ideas."

Rebecca:

Whether you are listening to an English speaker or reading English text, your primary goal is to identify the main idea. This means that you are looking for the main message or theme. Don't be distracted by every detail. Don't try to understand every word. In fact, this can make you feel very lost and confused, especially if the communication is moving quickly.

It's like standing too close to a picture. You can't see what the whole picture is about. You are focussing on small details but you do not understand the big picture. Step back. Get the gist. This means, it's important to understand the main message.

Once you fully understand the main message, then the details will start to make sense. And you have a better chance at guessing what a word means because you now know what the main topic is.

Terry:

I get it. The main idea is the most important message being communicated by the author or speaker. And often, it can be stated in a simple sentence.

Rebecca:

Right, for example...the "Titanic." Remember the movie?



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**Terry:**  
Yes.

**Rebecca:**  
What's the main idea? What's the message? Summarize it with a simple sentence.

**Terry:**  
"Don't ever follow a woman onto a big boat."

**Rebecca:**  
Well, I'm not sure about that – I would say the main message is, (romantic sigh) "Love endures."

**Terry:**  
"But the boat sinks."

**Rebecca:**  
Identifying the main idea may be a little more difficult when you're in a fast-paced conversation or reading longer texts.  
But we have techniques for identifying main ideas while listening or reading. These techniques are like keys that unlock the main message. For listening, the key is "stress." For reading, the key is "structure." Let's start with listening. Let's start with "stress."

**Terry:**  
So, when we say "stress," here we are not referring to being worried or anxious. No, we are talking about a feature of spoken English. Just listen to me now. When you LISTEN to ENGLISH SPEAKERS, you will NOTICE SOME WORDS are MUCH LOUDER than OTHER WORDS.

Not only are these words LOUDER; they are also LONGER, CLEARER, and HIGHER in PITCH. These words and syllables STAND OUT. We call this STRESS.

The important thing to remember here is that you can usually understand the main idea of a sentence just by hearing the stressed words. Stress is the key to identifying main ideas when listening.

**Rebecca:**  
We stress the important words, the words that carry the most meaning.  
We call these words "content words." We stress nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs.

Then there are words that we don't usually stress. When these words are spoken, they are quieter, shorter, reduced and lower in pitch. We almost swallow these words; we say them so fast. We call these unstressed words – grammatical words, such as – pronouns (like "I", "he" "they"), articles (like "a" and "the"), prepositions (like "in" "from" "at"), and conjunctions (like "and" "but"). These little words have a "grammatical function," but they do not communicate the main idea of the sentence.



**Terry:**

This reminds me of how telegrams used to work...this was a way of sending messages over long distances...before we had email. You would have to pay money for every word in the message, so you'd try to keep the message as short as possible. Let's play a game. Here is a message:

*Dear Father,*

*I have been traveling and I have lost my wallet. Could you please send me some money?*

*Henry*

Let's say each word costs \$5. There are 20 words here – that is \$100. This is too expensive. Let's keep the important words – the content words – nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs - the words that we stress when speaking.

*Father*

*Traveling*

*Lost*

*Wallet*

*Send*

*Money*

*Henry*

If all you had were these 7 words, you'd still understand the main meaning. "Father. Travelling. Lost wallet. Send money. Henry." (It would only cost \$35 instead of \$100.)

**Rebecca:**

Wow, so this is a strategy for identifying the main idea while listening. Listen for the words that are being stressed. You should be able to get the main message from those words. This is especially helpful when people are speaking quickly.

There is something else that you should know about stress. Stress gives English its rhythm. You can snap your fingers to rhythm. It's about the beat. In English, you can snap your fingers on stressed words... stressed words get the beat. Here, I'll show you.

Have a look at this simple 3 word sentence:

Boy meets girl. (snapping fingers)

All 3 words get a beat because all 3 words are content words – noun, verb, noun – they all get stressed.

Boy meets girl. (snapping fingers)

Now let's insert articles to make it a 5 word sentence.

"The boy meets the girl." (3 finger snaps)

But we still only stress the 3 content words. We don't stress the word "the" because it is an article.

"The boy meets the girl."



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OK, let's add a few more grammatical words:  
"The boy is meeting some of the girls."  
This sentence has 8 words, but still only 3 beats.

**Terry:**

Let's make the sentence even longer:  
"The boy could have been meeting some of the girls." This sentence has 10 words now, but still only the 3 original words are content words. All of the other words are grammatical words and they are not stressed.

**Rebecca:**

In fact, to keep the rhythm of the sentence to 3 beats, the grammatical words are linked together and reduced.

**Terry:**

It's like we are swallowing them.

"cudabin meeting"

These smaller words are compressed together to fit in between the stressed words, to keep the beat. So, "Could-have-been" sounds like "cudabin." "some-of-the" sounds like "sumatha."

"The BOY"

"cudabin MEETING"

"sumatha GIRLS"

If you're focussing on listening to every word, then you might have problems when you hear phrases like "cudabin" and "sumatha." "You might even try looking it up in a dictionary...what's a cudabin?"

**Rebecca:**

So listen for stressed words...they are the content words...they are the meaningful words.

**Terry:**

What about reading? What is the key to identifying main ideas while reading? The answer is "structure." First of all, let's look at the overall structure. What type of text is it? It will have a structure that tells you where to find the main ideas; for example, let's look at a newspaper article.

The headline, sub-headings and pictures provide a lot of information about the main topic. Also, the first paragraph in a newspaper article usually provides a summary of the main ideas being presented in that article.

Many texts and books have ways of highlighting the main ideas, including table of contents, chapter summaries, subheadings, bold & italicized fonts and margin notes. Pay attention to all of these features of structure.

So, a whole text usually has a structure that can help you identify main ideas; but longer texts are made up of individual paragraphs. Paragraphs also have a structure.



**Rebecca:**

Paragraphs are groups of 5-10 sentences, which are linked together because they explain a single main idea. After reading a paragraph, you should be able to state the main idea of that paragraph.

**Terry:**

The structure of a paragraph is like a house. The roof is the topic. It has a point; the main idea. Often, that main idea will be clearly stated in ONE sentence of that paragraph. This sentence is called the "topic sentence."

**Rebecca:**

In many cases, the topic sentence is the first sentence of the paragraph, but not always. The other sentences of the paragraph support the topic sentence. They provide more detail about this topic.

So, to identify the main idea of a paragraph you must find the "topic sentence." To find the topic sentence, you must first read the paragraph to gain an overall understanding of what it is about. Then, see if you can find ONE sentence that all the other sentences support. This sentence is the "topic sentence."

Once you find it, re-read it and create your own simple statement that re-states the main idea.

**Terry:**

Let's try identifying the main idea in a paragraph.

Here is a simple paragraph:

"Most people can learn a new language. It doesn't require 'special abilities.' You only need motivation and an excellent method. First, you have to want to learn the language. Setting goals and studying hard will require motivation. Second, you must choose a proven method that helps you to learn the language in real situations."

**Rebecca:**

So, I would say that the first sentence is the topic sentence – "Most people can learn a new language."

**Terry:**

Right, and the rest of the paragraph describes how that can happen. The other sentences provide extra details.

So what is the main message?

**Rebecca:**

In my own words, I would say, "It is possible for anyone to learn a new language."

**Terry:**

If you can identify the main message in each paragraph, you are on your way to understanding an entire article or other longer piece of text.



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You can practise doing this with the activities that go with this episode!

**Rebecca:**

Well, today we talked about a very important strategy when listening or reading – “identifying main ideas.” Once you understand the main topic, communication becomes meaningful. You have a solid foundation for communicating.

**Terry:**

With listening – the key is “stress.” Remember; don’t try to understand every word, especially if someone is talking really fast. Listen for the stressed words. Those words are louder and clearer. They are the meaningful words and you should be able to identify the main idea from those words.

**Rebecca:**

With reading – the key is “structure.” Most types of text have a structure that shows you where to find the main ideas. And every paragraph has a topic sentence. If you find that sentence, you will unlock the main idea of the whole paragraph.

These techniques help you identify the main idea, but what happens when you come across a new word that you don’t understand. In our next video, we will teach you how to “guess” at its meaning by looking at clues.

**Terry:**

Great. Well, are you ready to learn a new strategy game?

**Rebecca:**

Chess? Check.

**Terry:**

Checkmate