

How to Study a Foreign Language

"Two subjects seem to divide students into two groups: those who can and those who can't. These subjects are mathematics and foreign language." --Deese & Deese

The study of foreign language requires a separate set of study skills from most other subject areas. As with the study of mathematics, the study of foreign languages requires internalized knowledge of these certain study skills and time management patterns, much concentrated effort, and lots and lots of practice.

Learn to memorize effectively, to study outloud, and to space your learning time effectively. Note the following study skills:

1. Keep up with the work.
 - a. Never come to class late.
 - b. Never leave the class early.
 - c. Never, never miss the class.
 - d. Never allow yourself to fall behind.
 - e. Learn the early-taught skills quickly and well, as the study of language is cumulative. f . When studying, use as many of your five senses as possible, for example write words out, say them aloud, and listen to tapes or the instructor, etc.

2. Spend lots of time in recitation.
 - a. Shoot for spending 80% of study time in oral recitation.
 - b. Recite on a daily basis.
 - c. Focus on these critical study areas:
 - * Learn to read the foreign language
 - * Learn to understand the language when you hear it.
 - * Learn to speak the foreign language
 - d. Try total immersion...try to imitate tapes.

3. Master the foreign language's grammar.

Note: Usually, entry level courses stress grammar.

- a. Accept the fact that if you have experienced a competency problem with English grammar, it is likely that you will have difficulty understanding the grammar of the foreign language. For example, if your instructor introduces concepts related to tense, mood, gerunds, participles, etc., and these terms mean nothing to you, the lesson may be lost. Remember, many of your fellow classmates may benefit from your grammatical questions during class. Some difficulty with grammar may be common so, therefore, review grammatical terms as they relate to English constructions first, if necessary. Further, don't be afraid to ask your instructor after class or during office hours, to clearly explain any confusing grammatical terms.

- b. After you have reviewed the grammatical constructions in English, move to understanding the constructions as they apply to the foreign language.

c. Accept the fact that in comparing English grammar to the grammatical constructions of other European languages, English grammar is a bit unusual.

* English meaning usually comes from word order.

Example: Peter killed Paul.

Paul killed Peter.

* Other languages usually depend upon word endings. (English is also somewhat dependent upon word endings.) Example: Peter's friend killed Paul.

* Memorize the "irregularities" by brute force.

(Don't despair ... remember, English grammatical "rules" have more exceptions to the rules than any other languages!)

* Understand that frequently used words may be irregular as they may be derived from ancient forms

4. Learning "Unusual" Languages

* "Unusual" may indicate such languages are not based on the Roman alphabet, so you need to learn their "codes."

* Learn to cultivate your ear to their distinct sounds.

* Spend extra time studying these unfamiliar grammatical constructs.

5. Learn to THINK in the foreign language.

a. Thinking cuts down on translation time.

b. Learn to associate the foreign words directly with the object of representation, rather than its English equivalent.

For example: THINK--- \neg

Libro = not Libro = book

c. Constantly work at increasing your base vocabulary.

6. Resist the temptation to try and "read" a foreign language in a purely holistic sense.

7. Looking Up Foreign Words

a. Don't insist on looking up everything. Try to intelligently guess the meaning from the context. Consult a dictionary only when really puzzled.

b. Keep track of words you look up. Create a sort of "glossary of terms" as a study tool.

- c. Reread material in context immediately following translation in order to spot an "awkward" or incorrect translation.
- d. Immediately memorize all common prefixes, suffixes, affixes, roots, etc. to assist in translation.
- e. Learn & memorize helpful cognates, which are words in the foreign language which are rather similar in appearance and meaning to our. English words. Just watch out for "false friends" ---the words which visually appear as cognates, but are not similar in meaning.

8. Study Aids

- a. Vocabulary cards are often considered very helpful.
- b. Upper level students should use caution when using "Ponies or Trots," as these translations may be not entirely accurate. They may cut down on thinking, too.
- c. Never skip your homework. If your text comes with a workbook, do complete all exercises.
- d. If your text comes with tape(s), do use the tape(s) often.

9. Six Ways to Get the Most Out of your Modern Language Tutor

"The most common mistake a tutor can make is to spend too much time talking about the language. Discussing grammar, analyzing structures, conjugating verbs have very little to do with being able to speak the language." --Diana Conway

- a. Encourage your tutor to make everything concrete. Using pictures from magazines, cartoon drawings, or real objects in order to practice the language makes learning easier for most people. Involving body action wherever movement can be called for will also help your brain to remember new words such as verbs.
- b. Encourage your tutor to keep explanations simple. Forget exceptions (at first). If the tutor says something that you don't understand, plainly communicate that fact and ask for the "bottom line." You can get more elaborate later.
- c. Don't just use your tutor to help you in translation exercises. Use the tutor as an instructor for concepts you'd like to learn or to review and practice. Asking the tutor to help you do your homework is not efficient use of the tutorial learning period. The tutor's job is to instruct. The student's job is application of the lesson (i.e. homework). Doing your homework with a tutor is a false sense of security.
- d. Shield yourself from having a lack of confidence. Your tutor (and teacher) is understanding. No one expects perfection in the learning process. Try to almost enjoy

making mistakes as errors are a natural part of the learning process, especially in the pronunciation of language.

e . Allow your tutor to concentrate on structure, not just vocabulary. Even weak students can readily -memorize lists of words. However, allow your tutor to put vocabulary words into phrases or sentences so you can see and hear the words in some sort of meaningful context.

f . Ask you tutor (or teacher) lots of questions! Too often students hesitate to elicit information in a foreign language. When the tutor asks you a question in the foreign language, you should ask the same question back to the tutor before responding. Learn your interrogative words (who, what, when, where, why) and make up lots of questions for the purpose of practice.

10. Tips for Students with Foreign Language Apprehension

a. Study Habits: Analyze your personal study habits truthfully and accurately. Getting motivated to start work, organizing the load of work, and time management are often problem areas for students who fear the study of a foreign language.

b. Attention span: Participate and be aware of specific concentration and listening skills techniques to minimize distracting situations.

c. Following directions: Multi-step directions may be common. Keep written lists, especially of instructions which must be followed in strict sequence.

d. Communication: Practice describing/ defining all words, processes, and constructions. Watch that you do not substitute gestures for the spoken word when speaking the foreign language.

e. Skill area tips: Guard against inaccuracies in tense, imprecise word usage, or misspellings. Constantly double check your writings for precision and neatness on homework and tests.

11. Which language should I take?

"Take a language for the love of the language, for the love of the people, for the love if the culture." --Rev. Louis A. Evangelisto, QC

Sometimes, students feel apprehensive about the study of "unusual" languages (see #4 above). Sometimes it is thought that the study of European "Romance" languages will be more familiar to the native speaker of English; therefore, perhaps easier. However, a student might choose to consider the study of an unusual language for the following reasons:

a. There is more likely to be a zero-base of student knowledge in the class. No one has ever studied this language before so the students' backgrounds are more "equal."

b. "Unusual" languages are more likely to be taught by instructors who are actually native speakers of the language. This factor sometimes brings a larger degree of enthusiasm for the cultural experience to the class as a motivation technique.

c. Many students have had difficulty processing the grammatical constructions of English. Perhaps a completely different "code" or alphabet would appeal to some students.

d. Also, if the "unusual" language is more effective as an auditory communication vehicle, rather than a written one, it may appeal to those students who want to speak more than write a language. Likewise, some languages trade more on the visual sense which might appeal to students who prefer seeing over speaking language.

e. If a student is working hard in a foreign language course, yet not doing as well as he/she would like, conferencing with the instructor is very necessary in order to accurately define the student's progress. No student should impulsively drop a course without first consulting with the instructor.

f. Believe in yourself. Have some confidence. Try to resist the idea that you "can't" learn a foreign language, even if you've had a difficult time with language study in the past. Discuss fears, questions with your academic advisor or a language instructor. Get all questions answered to your satisfaction

GOOD LUCK!