

# How to Learn a Foreign Language

## General remarks

1. **Repetition.** Although repetition in learning a foreign language can be boring, it is key to your success. Many studies on language acquisition show that very high numbers of repetition are necessary for a word to become truly owned and in your long term memory. This is why so many language classrooms require choral repetitions. Repetitions can be verbal, aural, read or written. So, when you study, hit the word or verb conjugation as many times as possible.
2. **Hit all our senses (except smell).** You will retain new vocabulary better if the repetition includes as many of your senses as possible. Thus, ideally, you should be studying in a place where you can speak the work out loud as you write it down or read it. Writing large characters can also help with retention.
3. **Mirrors and acting.** Watch yourself in the mirror from time to time as you speak your foreign language. Practice various postures, act angry in your language, act happy or sad. Use the language to truly communicate your feelings so that it has meaning and context
4. **Fear.** Some students are very nervous in foreign language classes. You don't want to say something stupid and make a fool of yourself. Unfortunately, learning a language almost guarantees that you will say something stupid. That really is okay, you just have to convince yourself that it is okay. Even the best language learners experience this. My first night with my French family on my study abroad, I mistakenly told them I was pregnant in an attempt to say that I was full. They thought this quite amusing. I do too, now. You learn from your mistakes. This is part of the process.
5. **Ear Training.** In your native language, you don't have to listen very well. You only actually hear some of the words being said and your brain fills in the rest. You can't do this when you are first learning a language. You may have to train yourself to listen. If you are musical, you probably already have. This is why your language class almost certainly asks you to listen to cds or watch videos. Do this in small amounts at a time not for an hour straight. Build up your listening time just like you do for training for a sporting event.
6. **Translation.** For any modern language, translation is considered a no-no, although you will not be able to avoid it at times. Consider the following expression in English – “to be in a pickle.’ If you were to translate this word for word into another language it would be non-sensical. This may be an extreme example but the point is to understand that other languages say things in other ways and do NOT mirror English vocabulary or structures.
7. **Study Time.** Study often and in small time periods. Four half-hour study periods are usually more effective than a two hour block. Your attention span in another language is not as long as in your native language. Study every day, even if it is only for a short period of time.
8. **Office Hours/Tutors.** Use your instructor's office hours for grammar help or additional listening practice. Go and just speak the language for a few minutes. If you do decide to get a tutor, prepare for your tutoring session. Know what you want to work on and why. Study ahead of time. Don't think a tutor will pass the class for you.

9. **Continuity.** Don't take a semester off if at all possible!! You will forget your language at an alarming rate. If you are planning a break in your language sequence for any reason, see an advisor to come up with a plan.
10. **Spring/Summer?** If you have trouble learning languages, continuing over the summer may be to your advantage. Continuing over spring/summer means no break and thus less time to forget what you just learned. These classes may be smaller than those during the academic year. This means more chances to speak in class and more individual help. Spring/summer is also more intensive so you are more immersed in the language. If it is the only course you are taking you can really focus on it. On a cautionary note, some students feel overwhelmed by the intensity and can't keep up with the pace of language acquisition so you should speak with an advisor to help you make a decision about whether a spring or summer class is right for you.
11. **Repetition.** Did I already say this? Well, it bears repeating. Repeat, repeat, repeat!

## Diagnose the Problem.

### Vocabulary Acquisition.

If you can't remember vocabulary words, try these strategies: Flashcards, word association, memory tricks (make up your own association), learning from the target language to English first and then from English to the target language, making up vocabulary sentences.

### Flashcards

This is not a new trick but can be effective when used correctly. Get different colored flashcards. If your language has gender then use pink or red cards for feminine nouns and blue cards for masculine ones. Pick another color for neuter if needed. At the beginning of each chapter, put each new word or verb on a card (in the target language on one side, in English on the other). Write as large as the card will permit. Count the cards and divide by the number of days you have to learn your new vocabulary. Fifty words divided by five days equals ten words/cards a day. Do your cards first thing in the morning and carry them with you throughout the day. When you have a five-minute break, do them again. Write when you can but do them orally when you can't. Do them again at night right before bed. In the morning do your old stack of ten cards and put any words you can't remember into the new stack of ten. Keep reviewing old stacks of cards as often as possible. What you don't remember goes in the active pile.

### Word Association examples

	<u>Vocab word</u>	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Association</u>
French	<i>fort</i>	strong	to fortify
	<i>souvenir</i>	to remember	souvenir shop
	<i>la lune</i>	moon	lunar
German	<i>Fleisch</i>	meat	flesh
	<i>Blume</i>	flower	bloom
	Luft	air	aloft
Spanish	vender	to sell	vending machine
	mirar	to look at	mirror
	enfermo	sick	infirmary

### **Make up your own memory device.**

Russian      tratit      to spend      reminds you of treating a friend (spending money)  
Maybe, this one doesn't work for you but you can try making up one that does.

**Target language to English** is much easier so work on this direction first. You will get less frustrated.

### **Vocabulary sentences.**

Don't do the minimum. Try to use what you have just memorized to make it come alive and be useful. If possible have silly conversations with friends taking the same language. Whole sentences help you work with the larger patterns of the language. So memorize some whole sentences as well.

### **Grammar**

You can't learn how to replace direct and indirect objects with pronouns if you don't clearly understand what a direct or indirect object is in English. The same will be true with relative pronouns or the passive voice or the subjunctive. Fewer English classes seem to really teach grammar so you may have a knowledge gap. Some language instructors teach the English grammar at the same time, but others assume you know it. If you don't, then you need to either teach yourself or get your instructor to help. Grammar is the structure on which you are going to hang everything. It is basically just a series of patterns. If you memorize some sentences, this can help nail down the patterns and you can then substitute other verbs or nouns into the pattern.

A great reference book is the series: *English Grammar for Students of \_\_\_\_\_* (French, Spanish, German, Italian, Latin, Japanese, Arabic, or Russian) published by Olivia and Hill Press.

### **Listening Comprehension**

For some students this is the most difficult obstacle to overcome. Some languages have no word boundaries in spoken speech, which means that words seem to run together into one big word, making it difficult to sort things out. Your listening comprehension should improve if you are speaking the words yourself as often as possible. Again, don't listen to tapes for two hours straight but in short blocks of time. You will not be able to listen hard for that long of a time period. If you are really struggling, your instructor can probably supply you with a tape script so that you can follow along. You can use the script to help you associate the sound with the written word. Make sure that you don't come to rely on the script. There are many resources on campus for extra language listening and practice. The Language Resource Center has international news shows and videos. Subscribe to YABLA for French and Spanish. <http://www.umich.edu/~langres/> the Residential College has language lunch table and conversation hours. Romance Languages runs conversation groups. Check with your respective departments to see what is available. Rent movies with subtitles. To really challenge yourself, cover the subtitles.

Word association examples are taken from: *How to Learn a Foreign Language* by Graham Fuller, (Storm King press: 1987).