

Strategies for Learning a Foreign Language



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Foreign language learning...

- ***is cumulative.*** Each chapter or lesson will build on all the ones that came before it. The vocabulary and grammatical structures that you learn one week will recur in future assignments. Therefore, you have to learn *everything* well, and retain that knowledge long after you have been tested on it.
- ***requires daily study.*** Because foreign language learning is cumulative, it is important to not only keep up with new material, but also find the time to review past material regularly. This goal can be most easily accomplished by studying every day instead of saving up foreign language homework or review for just a couple of days each week.
- ***requires mastery, not just familiarity.*** Many people stop studying vocabulary words when they can go through a stack of flashcards and get them all right. However, at that point in the learning process, you are only just beginning to truly *learn* the words. In order to make those words a permanent part of your foreign language vocabulary, you need to continue to review beyond the point of familiarity to achieve true mastery – having as much command of your new foreign language vocabulary as you have in English.
- ***is actually useful!*** If you find yourself unmotivated in your foreign language class, imagine all of the opportunities you might have to use this language – international job opportunities, travel, cultural events, foreign films, getting to know new immigrants, and more. Thinking about the usefulness of the language in your future can motivate you to study harder.

In Class

- ***Be there and participate.*** Foreign language learning depends on regular contact with and use of the language. Class meetings are one of the few opportunities you will have to listen to and speak the language spontaneously. Class sessions also provide an opportunity to ask questions.
- ***Take notes.*** In discussion-oriented classes, you may not think that there is much need to take notes. But many foreign language teachers write key vocabulary words on the board, or explain grammar and verb conjugations during the discussion – it makes sense to write down these important details. Also, make a note of any word or phrase that was unfamiliar to you, or any topic of conversation that you had trouble following. Jot down questions that your teacher asks in class so that you can practice answers to those questions and similar ones later. These notes may help you figure out what material you need to study more extensively.
- ***When someone else is called on, think about your own answers.*** Don't just go on autopilot because you dodged the bullet and didn't get called on. Instead, think through your own answers to the questions that others are asking. Doing so will keep you more actively engaged in the class (and less likely to zone out!) and will also help you learn the material that others are talking about.
- ***Take chances!*** Many students resist participating in class because they fear looking stupid or

sounding funny. But taking chances and trying to communicate in the language is the only way you'll learn to be a fluent and comfortable speaker. Practice phrases like, "I don't know," and "I need some help" in the language you are studying so that even if you don't know an answer right away, you can at least respond to a question in the language.

In Your Study Sessions

- ***Practice the skills that you will need for the test.*** Test preparation should be, at least in part, guided by the requirements of the test itself. For example, if your test will require you to write passages in the foreign language, writing should be a part of your review and if you will have to listen to questions and write down answers during the test, you should incorporate listening activities into your study sessions.
- ***Make flashcards to learn vocabulary.*** Create flashcards for each new vocabulary word in your chapter or unit. Write the word in English or paste a picture representing the word on one side of the card and write the foreign language translation on the reverse. Be sure to write out any variations of the word or special information as well – plural spellings, whether it is masculine or feminine, special uses of the word, etc. Pay special attention to spelling and accent marks as you review – some people find it helpful to spell out each word letter-by-letter while reviewing in order to memorize spelling.
- ***Reduce your reliance on English.*** While reviewing vocabulary, instead of focusing on the English translation of words, try to associate the word you're learning with the concept it represents. So instead of reading the Spanish word "*perro*" and thinking the English word "dog," try to read "*perro*" and picture a dog in your head. This may help you eliminate the "middle man" of your English vocabulary and help you start to think in the language.
- ***Try color coding.*** Use packs of multicolored notecards or different colored pens color code your flashcards. You might choose one color for nouns, one for verbs, one for adverbs, and so on. Or you might write all masculine nouns on blue cards, all feminine nouns on pink cards, and all neutral nouns on white cards. Find a system that works for you.
- ***Use big flash cards to learn larger groups of information.*** Try 5x7 or 4x6 notecards for learning larger sets of information. For example, you could make one large flash card to help you learn all the days of the week, numbers 1-20, or colors in your new language. You could also write up a card for the conjugations of a particular verb form, writing the verb ending and a sample conjugation on one side and then writing a list of verbs with that ending and their meanings on the other side. By using small cards for individual words and larger cards for groups of words of broader concepts, you'll review both the "big picture" and the details.
- ***Shuffle your study cards often.*** While it is helpful to learn information in groups, it is also useful to isolate words from related words in your studying from time to time. It can be easy to remember the word for "Friday" when you study it in relation to other days of the week, for example, but it is much more challenging to recall that word when it is shuffled in between the word for "grapefruit" and the verb "to employ." By mixing up words of different types and from different chapters, you will challenge yourself to remember the words independently, without the "crutch" of related words to lean on. (Of course, on the test, if you can't remember the word for "Friday," there's no reason not to run down a list of the days of the week in your head to jog your memory!)
- ***Sort your study cards based on your level of learning.*** When you review your study cards, sort them into three piles, (1) I Know It, (2) I Sort of Know It, and (3) I Don't Know It. Go

through the third pile until you seem to know them, then add in the second pile and shuffle them. Go through that pile until it seems familiar. Finally, add in the first pile of cards you initially knew and go through the whole stack again. By reviewing what you don't know first, but continuing to add in more familiar material as well, you'll build up your knowledge of unfamiliar material while retaining your knowledge of the material that you initially knew. Set the cards aside and, later in the day, go back to them and try this sorting again – you may be surprised that things you thought you knew in one study session seem unfamiliar again later in the day.

- ***Study vocabulary well beyond the point of familiarity.*** It is tempting to quit studying vocabulary as soon as you can go through a stack of cards and know all of them, but this is just the beginning! Go through your notecards longer than you think you need to, and come back to them after a few hours, days, or even weeks to make sure that you continue to know the material that you learned a while ago. This sort of “overstudying” will help make your new vocabulary a permanent part of your knowledge base.

- ***Not everything is as boring as learning vocabulary.*** Early study in foreign language can be frustrating and/or boring because it feels like all you're doing is learning new words. Never fear! Once you have built up a working vocabulary of a few hundred words, you'll be able to figure out new words from context in conversation or in readings. This kind of learning is much more interesting and rewarding than simple vocabulary memorization.

Speaking

- ***Study out loud.*** In most foreign language classes, you will be asked to speak the language on a regular basis, and may well be tested on your ability to do so. Practice this skill while also learning vocabulary by reviewing your notecards out loud. Read any written passages aloud, practicing your pronunciation of unfamiliar words.

- ***Record yourself on a tape.*** When reading a passage aloud, start a tape recorder running, then go back and listen to the tape to critique yourself. If you have access to a language lab or other spoken word source in the language and can get access to two tape recorders, set one player to record and set the other tape recorder to play the native speaker. After each sentence, pause the native speaker tape and repeat the sentence aloud. When you're done, listen to the tape you recorded and compare the native speaker's pronunciation, inflection, and accent to your own.

- ***Practice with a friend.*** Probably the best way to practice speaking a new language is to converse with another person. Pair up with someone in class and practice. Ask each other questions that will require the use of new vocabulary words or verb forms and help one another when you get stuck.

- ***RELAX.*** You made a lot of mistakes when you learned how to speak English and, chances are, you'll make mistakes while speaking your new language, too. Understand that sounding a bit funny is part of the learning process and that the more you speak, the sooner you'll sound like a pro.

Reading

- ***Focus on overall meaning first, then deal with details.*** Use the title, pictures, captions, headings, or other clues to help you figure out the context and main topic before you read. Read through a passage once quickly to try to get the overall “gist” of the text, then go back to try to figure out confusing passages or unfamiliar words. Forcing yourself to read without

trying to translate every word will help you become more comfortable figuring out the language on your own.

- ***Avoid word-level translation.*** Whenever possible, try to figure out the meaning of the word from its context. If you can't discern the meaning, then at least figure out some information about the word – is it a noun? Is it masculine or feminine? Does it seem to have something to do with color? Then when you look up the word, see if your guesses were close.

- ***Don't write English words into the book.*** Some people like to write English words in the margins or between the lines of the text, but this strategy doesn't help you learn the word in the new language. Instead, make flash cards of unfamiliar words and their meanings.

- ***Don't use online translators.*** Typing a passage into an online translator and hitting “send” doesn't accomplish the goal of reading comprehension assignments, and it doesn't guarantee an accurate translation. There are subtleties of the language that word-by-word electronic or dictionary translation simply can't capture. There is no substitute for independent reading and learning from context.

Writing

- ***Read a lot.*** Skilled English-language writers are often avid readers; and reading in your new language will help you become a better writer in that language by familiarizing you with grammar, sentence structure, turns of phrase, and idiomatic expressions.

- ***Learn from earlier writing assignments.*** Instead of just discarding graded written work, use it to learn about your habits as a writer in your new language. Look for patterns of error: Do you often make mistakes with –ir verbs? Do you have trouble with gendered nouns? Is your vocabulary limited? Review words and grammar that you used incorrectly on your assignment and then edit with an eye toward catching similar errors in future assignments.

- ***Make sure you understand English grammar.*** Many students struggle with grammar in foreign language writing, but it can be hard to learn grammar in a foreign language if you don't fully understand grammatical concepts in English. How can you learn the past participle in German, for example, if you don't even know what “past participle” is? Find a good English grammar books and learn what all those terms mean and how they work in English – you'll find that your understanding of foreign language grammar becomes much clearer.

- ***Practice making sentences, not just conjugating verbs.*** While learning verb forms or even vocabulary, practice using the new ideas and words by writing new, complete sentences. Doing so will allow you to learn the new words while also practicing your writing skills.

- ***Keep a diary or write letters in the language.*** By writing regularly about the things that matter to you, you will improve your ability to express complex ideas in the language you are studying.

Listening

- ***Use language labs or practice tapes.*** If your book has a recorded lab or practice guide, use it regularly. You may even want to make your own practice tapes by recording yourself reading questions or passages, and then listen to them to make sure you can understand the spoken word as well as the written word.

- ***Study with a friend and read passages to one another.*** Group work can speed up your listening practice considerably. Read to one another or ask each other questions and hone your skills at understanding the language outloud.

- ***Practice the kinds of listening that you will do in class or on a test.*** Use your notes or old tests to develop a list of questions like the ones your teacher has used before. With a partner, take turns asking random questions from your list and answering them orally or (for test preparation) in writing.

Opportunities for Extra Practice

Foreign language learning can be greatly enhanced by additional contact with the language. Seek out opportunities for extra practice wherever you can. Set a goal of incorporating one extra practice activity each week.

- ***Study abroad.*** There is no substitute for total immersion in the language. Take advantage of Duke's study abroad opportunities to travel to a new place and study your chosen language in an exciting location surrounded by native speakers.

- ***Watch foreign films.*** Even if you can't go abroad, you can immerse yourself in a new language and culture via foreign films. If you are watching the movie at home and want to practice listening, get rid of the subtitles. Eliminating subtitles is an option on many DVD menus (as is listening to your favorite American movies in some languages, especially French or Spanish!).

- ***Read newspapers on the Internet.*** Check out the [internet public library](#) for a list of international newspapers available online. It includes links to hundreds of newspapers in dozens of languages. You might even try reading a news story in Spanish, then finding a story about the same event in an American newspaper and comparing the two, using the English version as a guide to help you figure out the words or sections that were puzzling in the Spanish version.

- ***Read books in your new language.*** Seek out good books in the language you are trying to learn. The classics in your language are always a good place to start, but many people find it interesting to read more modern novels or short stories which might give you a better sense of how people actually speak the language today. You could also consider getting copies of books you have read in English in their original language, or getting foreign language translations of popular American books for added practice. The Harry Potter series, for example, is available in several languages and children's books usually have a simple enough vocabulary to make it easy for beginning language learners to read and comprehend the text.

- ***Look into on campus activities.*** Many schools offer opportunities for foreign language clubs. You could also form a group of your own to meet for lunch or dinner once a week and practice the language.

- Volunteer with an ESL program in your community.