

TIPS ON STUDYING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

You've signed up for a foreign language course, and your anxiety level is reaching a new high. Well, join the crowd. Many students are unprepared to study a foreign language. You may have heard (or spoken) these laments: "I just don't have any motivation," "I don't have enough self discipline," "I don't have any background. I don't even know English grammar," "I just don't have an aptitude for learning foreign languages" and "I have a mental block against foreign languages." All is not lost. You can learn a foreign language, and hopefully these tips will help. The first and most important tip is: *A foreign language course is different from any other course you have taken; you must study every day. You can't study for the course only on TT or MWF or Sunday night and expect to do well or come close to learning the language.*

The three most important ingredients for success in studying a foreign language are:

1. A disciplined attitude
2. Willingness to participate in class
3. Doing assignments regularly

Schedule your time and allow daily study periods

Approximately 80 percent of your study time should be spent in recitation or practice, including laboratory practice if there is a specific lab program for the course. Study out loud. The key to speaking the language is imitation and memorization through repetition. Immediately before each class spend a few minutes warming up by speaking or reading the language.

Do not mumble in class

Mumbling your answer will never help you speak the language. At least learn to say "don't know" in the language. Participate silently when others are called on in class

Keep up with the class work

It is harder to catch up than to keep up. Neglect of work tends to snowball. In learning a foreign language, the elementary blocks of information are the basis for all the material you will learn.

"Bother" your teacher at once if you need help, and do not cut class

Once you fall behind, it is extremely unlikely that you will ever catch up. If you skip class, you will pay for that cut. You will get behind.

Learn the grammar of the language

Grammar rules are language's bones—words are only flesh. You can look up or ask for a vocabulary word, but grammar is basic. Know the rudiments of some grammatical system—English or some other. Relate new grammatical terms to equivalent features of your own language. Understand the grammatical terms; don't just mindlessly memorize tenses, rules, etc. (But ultimately a memorization process must take place. It's impossible to function without memorizing vocabulary and verb forms for the various tenses. The trick is to memorize by using short sentences and phrases instead of lists of isolated words.) Master irregular features by studying them in sentences and phrases rather than just lists.

Study phrases and sentences

Avoid word-by-word translation. Always read for context. Read the full context in which any unfamiliar word appears before looking it up. If you do not recognize a form, try to parse it; that is, analyze the phrase grammatically: First, find the verb (this often tells you whether the subject is singular, plural, etc.). Then find the subject, etc. After approximately a half-hour of translation (divided into 15-to 20-minute periods), take a brief break and begin a new study period by rereading or reciting the completed translation.

Use flash cards

Make your own cards. Write phrases rather than isolated words. Put grammatical features as well as meanings on the cards, e.g., feminine, subjunctive tense, etc. Keep the number of cards workable by putting aside those you've recited correctly five times in a row. Shuffle the pack frequently. Distribute your practice time. For example, it is better to study your cards for ten minutes at a stretch six different times than to study them for one hour straight

Immerse yourself in the language

Constant or regular exposure to the spoken language will help you recognize grammatical forms of that language as well as vocabulary. Listening to the language outside of the classroom or lab will give you a wider exposure and allow you to acquire the "feel" or "rhythm" of the language. You can also learn more about the cultural aspects of the people and countries that speak the language. Here are some "listening" resources:

1. The language lab. Use the tapes behind or ahead of your assignment. Use the tapes from the course before or after your present course.
2. Listen to a classmate/friend read.
3. Sit in on another class (same level course).
4. Go to the department's conversation class and public lectures.
5. Talk to foreign students. Check with the International Student and Scholar Services Office.
6. Watch programs in foreign languages on television. Public television occasionally airs foreign movies and programs from other countries. Houston has three television stations broadcasting exclusively in Spanish (channels 45,48 and 49).
7. Watch foreign movies on and off campus. You can also rent foreign movies from the better video rental stores.
8. Listen to programs in foreign languages on the radio. Public radio stations (KPFT 90.1 in particular) frequently broadcast in foreign languages. Houston has numerous Spanish-language stations on both AM and FM.
9. Shortwave radio. This is your best radio resource. You can tune in West Germany, Holland, England, Canada, Moscow, Mexico, Switzerland and others in more than a score of languages. If you are going to buy a portable radio, ask the dealer for one with the International Shortwave Bands. It will not cost you much more.

Practice for quizzes and tests

Prepare for quizzes by practicing the skills you will use on the quiz. If the quiz will call for you to write, practice writing. If you'll be asked to listen, practice listening and so forth. And remember, proofread your work before you turn it in.

Read these suggestions once a week for the first six weeks after receiving them. Then, once a semester for two years. After that, every now and then.

Adapted from RASSL/UT-Austin