Tips on Studying a Foreign Language

Though many students may feel they have a mental block or even lack the aptitude for learning foreign languages, most can learn a second language IF they are willing to put in the necessary time. Here are some practical suggestions for studying effectively, overcoming anxiety, and learning the grammar and skills necessary for success in college foreign language classes.

1. **STUDY EVERY DAY.** A foreign language course is different from any other course you take. Language learning is cumulative: you cannot put it off until the weekend. Study 1 or 2 hours for every class hour if you want an A or B.
2. **DISTRIBUTE YOUR STUDY TIME** in 15- to 30-minute periods throughout the day. Focus on a different task each time: vocabulary now, grammar next, etc. Get an overview during the first half hour: spend 10 minutes reviewing dialog, 10 minutes learning new vocabulary, 10 minutes learning new grammar ... so you'll at least have looked at it all. Approximately 80% of your study time should be spent in recitation or practice, including practice in the language lab.
3. **ATTEND AND PARTICIPATE IN CLASS WITHOUT FAIL** — even if you are not well prepared. Class time is your primary opportunity for practice. Learn the grammar and vocabulary outside of class in order to make the most of class time. Spend a few minutes "warming up" before each class by speaking or reading the language.
4. **MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE IN THE CLASS.** Get to know your classmates so you will feel you are among friends. Visit your instructor during office hours to get acquainted: explain your goals and apprehensions about the course.
5. **LEARN ENGLISH GRAMMAR IF YOU DON'T ALREADY KNOW IT.** Grammar is the skeleton of a language, its basic structure: you must learn it. Review a simplified English grammar text. Compare new grammatical structures in your foreign language to their English equivalents.
6. **PRACTICE FOR TESTS** by doing what you will have to do on the test. If the test will require you to write, then study by writing — including spelling and accents. If you will be asked to listen, then practice listening. Ask for practice questions; make up your own test questions. Invent variations on patterns and forms. Over-learn: study beyond the point of recognition to mastery.
7. **DEVELOP A GOOD ATTITUDE.** Have a clear personal reason for taking the class. Set personal goals for what you want to learn. Leave perfectionism at the door; give yourself permission to make mistakes and learn from them.
8. **GET HELP IF YOU NEED IT.** Talk with your teacher. Form study groups among class members. Use tutoring services. Don't wait!

READING and WRITING a foreign language are analytical skills. You may be good at these if you are a logical person who attends to detail. Train yourself through practice to notice and remember details such as accents and gender agreement.

READING SKILLS TIPS:

- First, read the vocabulary list for the assignment. Next, read the questions over the reading. Then read all the way through a new passage two or three times, guessing at meaning from context. Avoid word-by-word translation.
- Isolate new vocabulary and study it separately. DON'T write between the lines! Make flash cards. Carry them with you and recite them several times during the day at odd

moments. Over-learn them until they are automatic.

- Isolate new grammatical forms and study them separately. Write the pattern on a flash card and memorize it. Write out and label a model sentence. When you encounter the form while reading, pause and recite the pattern to recognize the form.

WRITING SKILLS TIPS:

- Pay attention to detail: notice accents, order of letters, etc. Compare letter-by-letter different forms (singular, plural, gender, etc.). Write out conjugations of verbs, declensions of pronouns, etc., and check your endings. Memorize irregular verbs.
- To master spelling, have a friend dictate 10 words to you. Write them out and immediately have your friend spell them correctly aloud while you look carefully and point at each letter. Repeat until you get all the words right.
- Write (in your own simple foreign vocabulary words) a story you have just read.

LISTENING and **SPEAKING** are performance skills. You may do well at these if you are naturally gregarious. Students in foreign language classes often have difficulty hearing and speaking because they are anxious about making mistakes. Give yourself permission to be spontaneous and to take risks.

LISTENING SKILLS TIPS:

- Frequent the language lab. Read the exercises in your book first; then listen and read together; then listen without looking at the print. Say aloud/write what you hear.
- Participate silently in class when others are called on to speak. Focus on the task; don't worry about how you'll do.
- If you feel nervous, relax yourself physically by taking a couple of slow, deep breaths. When called on, pause, relax, and give yourself time to respond.
- Listen while a friend dictates to you and write what you hear. Check for accuracy.
- Practice: join language clubs, watch foreign TV, listen to foreign radio.

SPEAKING SKILLS TIPS:

- Study out loud! Mimic the sounds of the language. Don't mumble. Although most people feel embarrassed making strange sounds, the language will soon feel more familiar to you.
- When called on in class, say something, even it it's wrong: you'll learn from it. If you need a moment to think, repeat the question. If you don't know the answer, say in your foreign language, "I don't know" or "help!"
- Practice with a foreign student who wants your help to learn English or with another class member.

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http://www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/lrnres/handouts/1705.html