

10 Tips for Language Learning Success

If you're a first-time language learner, you know that emotional ups and downs come with the territory. When you understand a concept or begin to comprehend the language, you may experience feelings of exhilaration. However, these are often followed by moments of frustration and discouragement, during which you might feel as if you will never master the concepts and attain the ability to understand and communicate effectively. Below are some time-tested, research-verified approaches that will help mitigate potential frustration and will increase your ability to succeed in language learning.

1. Set realistic expectations

It is natural to feel uncomfortable in a language class. You're used to being in classes where the mode of communication -- the language of instruction is a given.

In a language course, however, it is the mode of communication itself that is the focus of instruction. For this reason, a language course is different than most other courses you will ever take. **Not understanding** and **making mistakes** -- things that are negative learning indicators in other courses -- are a very natural part of the language learning process. Accept the fact that you will not understand everything. In fact, at the very beginning, you will not understand much at all.

Remember that during the initial period of adaptation your ear and your mind are adjusting to the sounds and the rhythm of the language. Though you will not understand all of what is being said, you will be amazed at your increasing ability to make sense of the language. Remember that the only way to learn the language is through practice, practice, and more practice; in the course of practicing you will make many errors ... and you will learn from them.

2. Break study time into smaller chunks

Research shows that language students learn more effectively and retain more when they study **frequently** and for **shorter periods of time** than if they study infrequently for extended periods of time. Try to study each day, and whenever possible, several times a day. This means, for instance, doing a few homework exercises each day rather than doing all homework assignments the night before they are due.

In addition, there are many otherwise mentally "idle" moments during the day when you can work in some studying. For example, you can review vocabulary while eating breakfast, recite the alphabet while showering, count your steps as you walk between classes, name as many objects as you can in the target language on your way to school, take your vocabulary flash cards with you on a road trip.

There are many moments during the day when you can squeeze in a few minutes of practice time. Through the repetition of material, it will become increasingly familiar, until it eventually becomes an automatic part of your language repertoire.

3. Learn vocabulary effectively

Vocabulary is the most essential element of communication. The more words you know, the more you can say and understand.

The absolute best way to learn vocabulary is through the use of flash cards *that you make yourself*. Purchase a set of 3 x 5 index cards and cut them in half. (This makes them small enough to carry everywhere.) Write a vocabulary word on the front and its English definition on the back. As you learn more information about each word (e.g. plural forms of nouns, principle parts of verbs), you can add these to the cards.

There are many ways you can use flash cards as a learning tool. To help you learn and remember noun genders, for example, you can color code the nouns by gender, either by using colored cards or colored ink. When studying, organize words in meaningful groups (e.g., by noun gender, in thematic categories, regular verbs vs. irregular verbs). Shuffle the cards or groups, so that you use the stack(s) in a different order each time. Use the cards in both directions: first look at the foreign language words and try to recall the English definition. Then shuffle and look at the English definitions and attempt to remember the foreign language words. Flash cards offer many possibilities. Take advantage!

4. Practice language actively

Whenever possible, speak the language aloud rather than reciting it silently to yourself. Say vocabulary words out loud, read passages in the text aloud, do pronunciation activities orally and not just mentally. Write out the answers to activities rather than gliding through them in your mind. Read aloud entire sentences in an activity rather than just reading a fill-in response. Transferring language from your mind to your mouth is a skill that requires a great deal of practice.

5. Do homework conscientiously

In the course of a conversation, it is not practical to look up noun genders or fret over verb tenses. But homework offers you a golden opportunity to practice your language skills in a deliberate manner.

When doing your homework, you have the luxury of time. Look up words and genders you don't know. Refer to charts and other resources available to you.

This will reinforce the material and eventually it will become automatic. If you never look things up or simply guess, you will be strongly reinforcing errors and you will never learn proper forms and words. Read instructor feedback on homework and ask clarifying questions when necessary. Maximize the utility of your homework to your learning.

6. Form study groups

Meet regularly with classmates to work together on homework assignments, to learn vocabulary, to study for tests, or just to practice speaking the language. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses when it comes to language learning. Learning with others helps decrease knowledge gaps and gives you opportunities to actively discuss concepts and material covered in class, thereby increasing the chances that you will remember it. You will benefit from the knowledge and abilities of your classmates, as they will from yours.

7. Identify your learning style

Each person has his/her own learning style and everyone learns at a different pace. Try not to get frustrated if someone else in class seems to be progressing more quickly than you. You might find that you have a knack for grammar but have difficulty with speaking. Or you may find that you understand things perfectly in class, but when it comes to the homework assignments, you feel lost. Strive to identify your own personal strengths and let these help you in your learning process. If you are a visual learner, for example, write things down and try to associate words with images. At the same time, strive to identify your own personal learning barriers and make efforts to overcome them. For example, if you tend to be quiet in classes and often refrain from participating, force yourself to sit at the front of the classroom.

8. Maximize your language exposure

If your ultimate goal is language fluency, as it is for many students learning a language, then it is important to know that you will become more fluent more quickly if you increase the amount of contact you have with the language. You can start by simply practicing the language with a classmate outside of class. You can befriend native speakers in your

community or attend a local foreign language conversation hour, if one exists. Rent a movie in the target language, or listen to authentic audio or video online. (Many foreign television and radio stations have streaming or archived audio and video programs).

Remember that you won't be able to understand everything, and you might not understand much at all at first. Nonetheless, these experiences will make you increasingly familiar with the sounds, rhythm, and intonation of the language. Increased exposure and active practice with the language will help you develop skills more quickly.

9. Spend time on task

Use the time you have in class each week to work on your language skills. This means not only attending and paying attention in class. If you finish a partner activity early, use the time to try conversing with your partner in the target language on a related topic. Or work on your written homework. Or study the weekly vocabulary. If you finish a lab activity early, attempt trying some supplemental activities, work on the week's written homework, or explore some cultural sites. If you are in your language class, you should be doing something language-related. Make the most of the time you have to maximize your learning.

10. Communicate with your instructor

Take responsibility for your learning. Communicate with your instructor any problems that may be interfering with your learning or any specific difficulties that you are having with the material. Seek help immediately when you need it. You might be surprised how easily such difficulties can be resolved. Also, be proactive about making up missed work. Not only your grade, but also your success at learning depends on it.