

MAKE IT LAST

9 TACTICS FOR MEMORIZING,
UNDERSTANDING, & RETAINING
A FOREIGN LANGUAGE



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction. 3

Tactic 1: Use Spaced Repetition 5

Tactic 2: Look for Patterns 7

Tactic 3: Use Mnemonics 9

Tactic 4: Engage Your Senses 11

Tactic 5: Teach Someone Else 13

Tactic 6: Be Interested 15

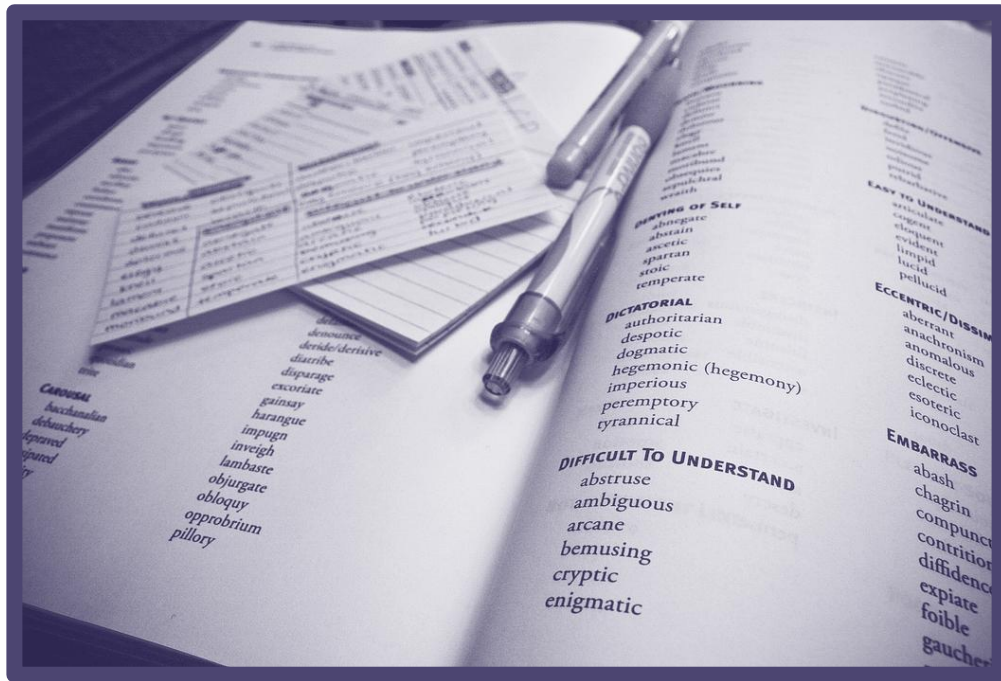
Tactic 7: Change Your Environment 17

Tactic 8: Break It Up 19

Tactic 9: Experiment 23

INTRODUCTION

Memorization vs. Understanding & Retention



We've all done it: crammed exhaustively for several hours the night before an exam, fueled by energy drinks and chocolate bars. You pat yourself on the back as you regurgitate the information on the paper the next day, then promptly forget it, as if you'd never learned it at all. This method may help you pass tomorrow's exam, but it certainly won't help you understand and retain the material in the long run. If you're trying to scrape by in your required algebra class, this may not bother you. But learning a foreign language is not just about passing a test—it's about the long-term goal of communication. Unfortunately, cramming just won't cut it. In this eBook, we'll explore 9 language-learning tactics that ensure understanding and retention.



We remember what we understand; we understand only what we pay attention to; we pay attention to what we want.”

- Edward Bolles, “Remembering and Forgetting”

TACTIC #1

Memorization with Spaced Repetition



When it comes to learning languages, there is a lot to memorize, particularly in the way of vocabulary. But mindless drilling of words and phrases won't help you commit them to memory. One highly-touted tactic for memorizing declarative material is *spaced repetition*. This learning technique is a more sophisticated version of the flash card model, in which you flip your cards over to test your knowledge and sort them into your “I know these.” and “I don't know these.” piles. Spaced repetition incorporates one more key factor: *timing*. This method presents information at strategic intervals, ensuring that it stays fresh in your mind.

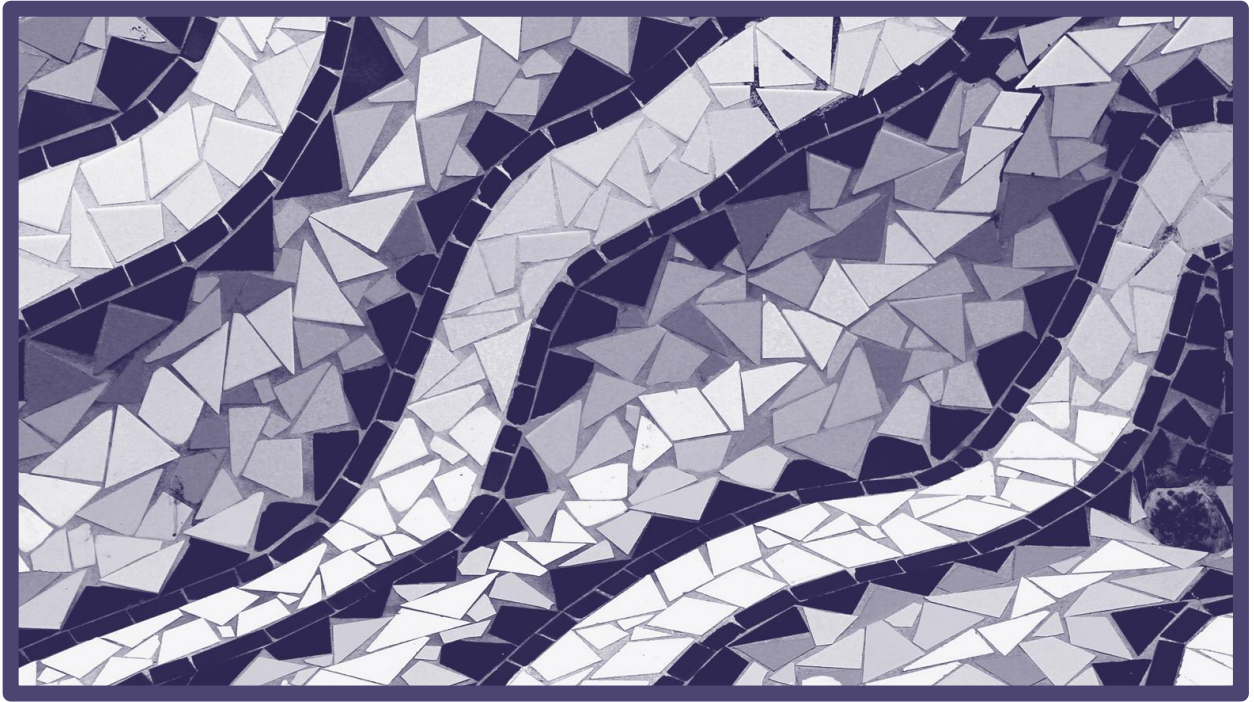
Think about the last time you flipped through a big stack of flash cards. Going through the entire stack over and over doesn't let you focus on the words and phrases that you need to review the most. This is where spaced repetition comes in. By presenting words and phrases for review at strategic intervals, this method ensures that they always stay fresh in your mind. Technology is particularly good at implementing spaced repetition algorithms to determine which words and phrases need to be reviewed more often, and when. Words you master quickly can be filed away for future review, while words you struggle with appear more frequently until you demonstrate mastery.

While you can attempt to replicate this method on your own with physical flash cards, that requires you to be very organized and completely honest with yourself about how difficult you find each word. It also means forcing yourself to repeat material you find most difficult, which can be hard to do. It is much easier to leverage technology to achieve this affect, ensuring you're spending enough time on each new word, and reviewing it at the appropriate intervals.

Want to see spaced repetition in action and try it for yourself?
Sign up for a [free trial](#) of [Transparent Language Online](#).

TACTIC #2

Look for patterns.



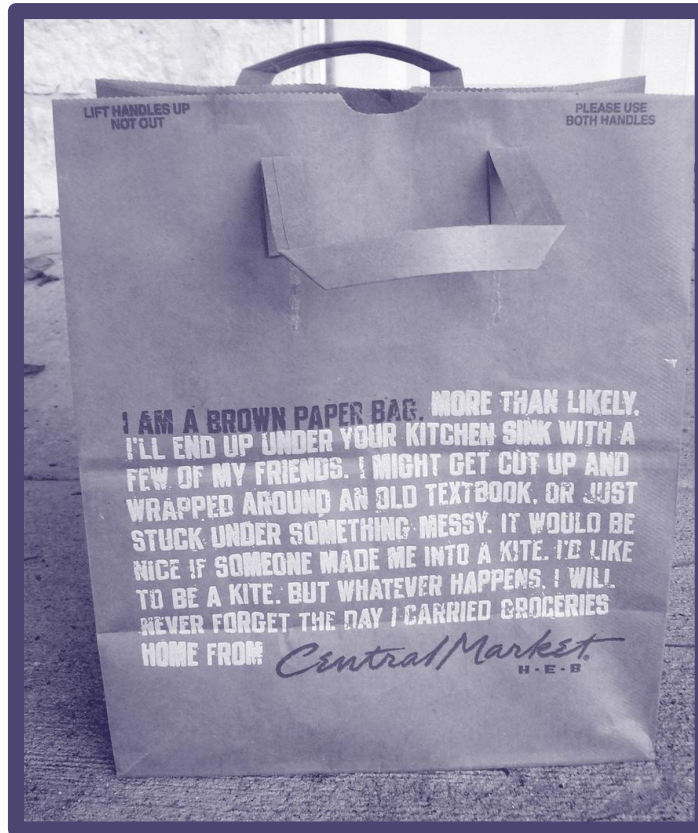
We are much better at remembering content that makes sense and has some logical order or recognizable pattern. While you're learning a language, be on the lookout for patterns, or disruptions to patterns. These will often help you figure out and better recall spelling and grammar rules.

Of course, there will always be exceptions to these rules that must be memorized on their own, but here are a few examples of how identifying patterns can help you understand and remember grammar:

- **Noun gender:** Anyone learning languages with noun gender understands the desperate search for a logical explanation as to which nouns are masculine, feminine, or neuter. Unfortunately, there isn't always one, but there are patterns that can help you remember gender more easily. German nouns that end in *-at*, *-ant*, *-et*, or *-ent*, for example, are all masculine nouns. Memorizing these four endings is much easier than memorizing the gender of every word that includes them.
- **Adjective agreement:** It doesn't end there with gender issues in many languages, though. You might notice that the adjective *bleu* (blue) in French is sometimes spelled *bleue*. There is a reason for this: French adjectives agree with the gender of the modified noun. Understanding this concept will help you apply this rule across the board to every adjective, preventing you from having to memorize each and every instance where you need to append an extra -e. Look for these types of patterns, and seek out explanations.

TACTIC #3

Use mnemonic devices.



A mnemonic device is a learning technique that helps you recall longer, more complex pieces of information by simplifying them into something easier to memorize and retain.

For example, my high school French teacher used the acronym “BAGS” to help us remember which kinds of adjectives come before a noun (whereas the typical adjective would come after). Ten years later, I can still tell you that adjectives describing beauty, age, goodness, or size come before the noun. Apparently, the acronym worked!

Using these devices, such as acronyms, lists, or rhymes, is a form of memorization, but it's not *mindless*, which sets it apart from other less effective tactics.

Reading idly about adjective placement over and over won't help you remember which ones go where. Coming up with a simple acronym like BAGS forces you to really *think* about what you're reading and *actively* design a way to remember it.

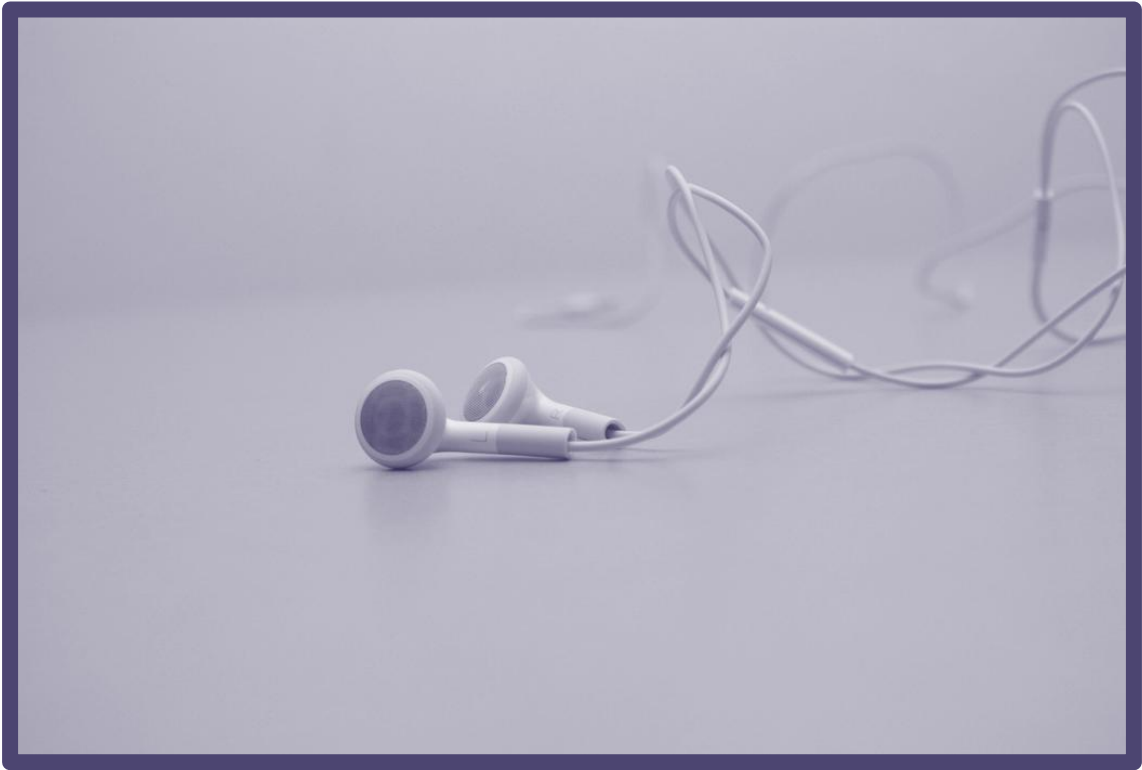
Curious about what's already out there? Here are a few of my favorite mnemonic devices:

- Use the **acronym** “O FUDG” to remember the accusative prepositions in German: *Ohne, Für, Um, Durch, Gegen*
- Memorize the little **rhyme** to remember when to use *estar* vs. *ser* in Spanish: If it's how you feel, or where you are, always use the verb *estar*.
- **Associate** a word with an image or concept in your own language: the Japanese word for “to die” is 死ぬ (shinu), which sounds like “she knew”. Remember this word with the sentence “She knew the flower would die.”

Sometimes these devices are silly, but that's exactly why they're effective. Come up with devices that work for you and kiss exhaustive note-taking good-bye!

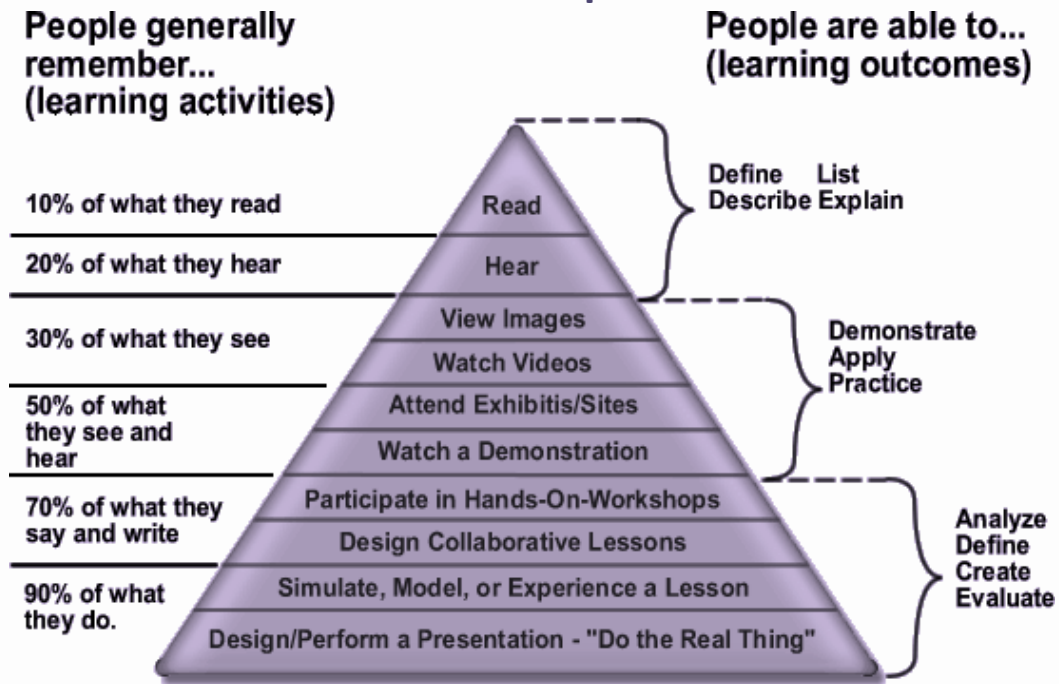
TACTIC #4

Engage your senses.



According to Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience, we retain only about 10% of what we read and 20% of what we hear, but up to 90% of what we say and do. Dale himself encouraged learners not to take the specific percentages too seriously, but the overall theory holds true: the more actively involved you are with the material you're learning, the more likely you are to retain it. When you're studying a language, go beyond textbooks. Look for resources that involve audio, images, and lots of interactivity.

Dale's Cone of Experience



So how can you engage your senses while you're sitting down to study?

- **Read out loud or speak to yourself out loud:** with a foreign language, the benefits are twofold: speaking the words out loud will help you remember them *and* give you a chance to practice pronunciation.
- **Get moving:** getting physical will create a mind-body connection that reinforces the words and phrases you're learning. You can act out what you're learning, use gestures when explaining concepts, or use your finger to trace the words you're reading.
- **Use technology:** language programs like Transparent Language Online include sound, images, and interactive activities that will encourage you to read, write, speak, and listen to the language while you build your skills.

TACTIC #5

Teach someone else.



If you recall from Dale's Cone, we can recall up to 90% of what we *do*. What better way to put a language to use than by spreading it around! One of the most powerful ways to check your comprehension of any concept is to explain it to someone else. It takes time and focus to prepare a lesson for another person. Delivering that lesson will shine a light on the pieces you don't understand quite as well as you thought you did.

If you're learning a language with a buddy, you can take turns: one of you teaches the day's lesson while the other leads a review on that topic later on.

Don't have a friend or colleague to learn with? You can also search for a language exchange partner online or in your nearest city. Find someone who speaks your target language and is looking to learn your native language. The benefit is two-fold: you have an audience for your explanations and your partner gets your assistance in improving their second language as well.

You can keep it much more simple than that, of course. Even if they're *not* learning the language with you, having a friend or family member there to listen to your explanations will create a new memory that you can associate with that particular piece of the language. Mention in passing to your friends how interesting a certain grammar rule or etymological origin is, and see if they're willing to let you bend their ear for a minute.

TACTIC #6

Be interested.



Here is an obvious tactic, but it's worth a reminder. One reason so many students face the cram-and-forget dilemma is simply that they're uninterested in the material. If you're studying a language on your own, chances are good that you *are* interested. But we all have our limits—don't force yourself to study when you're tired, distracted, or unmotivated. If you really want to absorb and understand what's in front of you, you'll need to be present, engaged, and excited to learn it.

So yes, if you're just plain exhausted, don't bother cracking open a language book or logging into Transparent Language Online. You won't remember much of it tomorrow anyway.

But how can you avoid letting "I'm just too tired." or "I don't feel like it right now." become excuses that derail you from your language goals?

- **Create a schedule:** if you're accustomed to studying at the same time every day, it will become second nature. If you schedule out all of your tasks and responsibilities in advance, you're ensuring that you'll be able to stick to your habit. Fail to plan, plan to fail.
- **Make use of dead time:** Even if you can't dedicate 20 minutes solely to studying, look for times when you can multitask. Riding the bus, showering, folding laundry—these are common periods of dead time during which you can focus on a language instead of twiddling your thumbs.
- **Have fun with it:** find study methods that you enjoy. Learning a language isn't all about books and charts and flash cards. Turn on a movie or listen to some songs in the target language while you do dishes. Set a goal to identify 10 new words from these sources and memorize them tomorrow.

TACTIC #7

Change your environment.



It probably won't surprise you to hear that we associate information with our environment. Have you ever heard a song, and it immediately took you back to a certain place and time when you last heard it? That's because our memory is context-dependent. Specific pieces of information can be recalled more successfully when we replicate the context in which we originally learned them. Studying in one place, however, limits active recall. Try switching up your learning environment to ensure you'll be able to recall what you've learned any time, anywhere.

If you study exclusively in your bedroom, you're training your brain to associate the language with that space. When you're in another space, you may have a harder time recalling what you've learned.

Get out there and explore some new study destinations. Some of my favorite places to venture for a good study session:

- **My local library**—they have comfy chairs, free WiFi, and a trove of [language resources](#) that I can add to my arsenal.
- **A coffee shop**—it smells great, there's just enough background noise, and I can get a little something to munch on as a reward for my hard work.
- **A park bench**—there's nothing better than some fresh air and warm sunshine to keep you energized during a study session.
- **The beach**—this may be a seasonal spot, but swapping out your trashy beach reading for a book in your target language does the trick.

TACTIC #8

Break it up.



One reason we fail to remember what we learn in a new language is that we fail to engage with it often enough. That's not to say that total 24/7 immersion is the only solution—not even close. A brief but *productive* 15-30 minutes of study *every single day* is all you need. Have you ever heard that exercising in short, intense intervals yield better results than hours and hours of moderate exercise? The same concept applies to learning languages. So, break up your studies into smaller chunks!

Short bursts of study are more manageable than hours-long sessions in terms of logistics and memorization. Who actually has five hours to devote to learning a language in one day, right? But more than that, whose brain can focus for five hours, or retain that much new material? You can turn off your phone and back away from Facebook for a solid 30 minutes fairly easily. But our attention spans are short and distractions are bound to creep up the longer we go, which disrupts the learning process. Devoting a higher level of concentration to your studies will ensure better retention in the long run.

That's not the only benefit of breaking up your language learning each day. This approach also fends off the dreaded symptoms of burn out. Remember: everything is good in moderation. You feel pretty satisfied after one or two slices of pizza, but if you down the entire pie yourself? You're in for some hurt. After 30 minutes of studying, you'll feel accomplished and excited, but pushing yourself through several hours may leave you exhausted. The *last* thing you'll want to do the next day is sit back down with your verb charts.

You can't master a language in ten days, so learn to pace yourself and enjoy the journey.

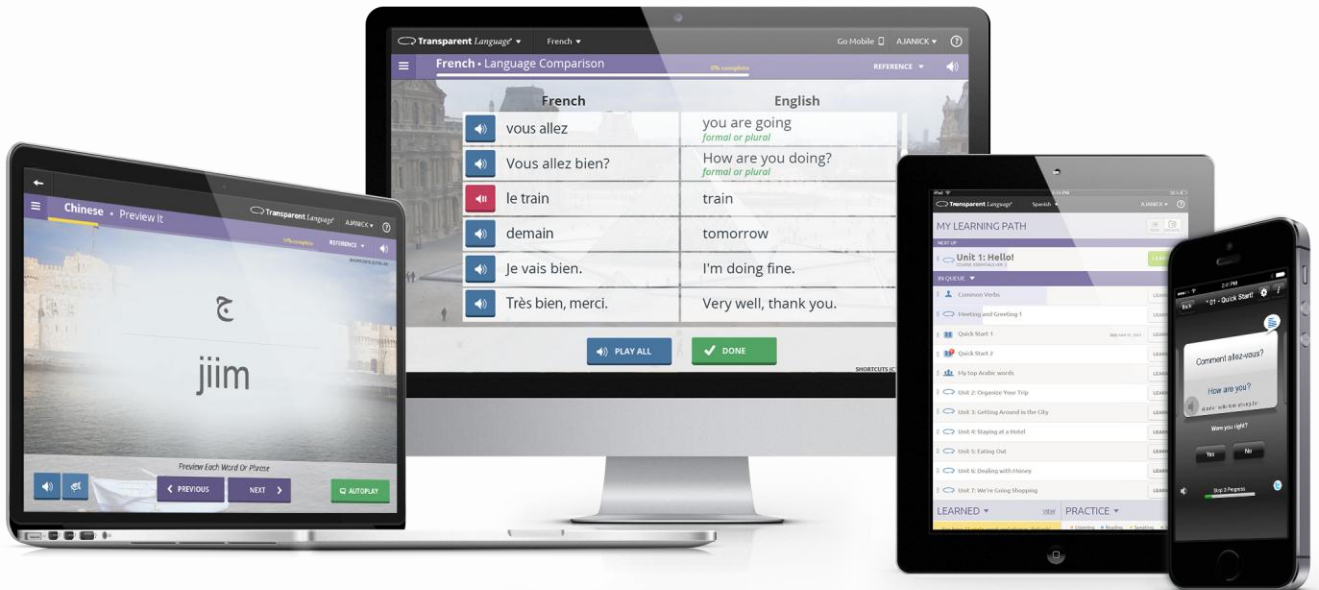
TACTIC #9

Experiment.



The last tactic is simply to focus less on the tactics. There is no single method to successfully learn and retain a foreign language. You know yourself better than anyone, so try new things and develop your own methods. Explore new techniques and change up your routine every few weeks to prevent yourself from getting bored. Not happy with your results from certain techniques? Ditch them and move on. Never be afraid to experiment when it comes to learning a language!

TRY IT FREE!



So, there you have it. Learning a language takes a lot of work, but that work doesn't need to involve hours and hours of mindless memorization. With **Transparent Language Online**, we make it easy to memorize and retain a new language through:

- a custom **spaced repetition algorithm** that ensures you've mastered new words and phrases
- a **Learned Items refresh system** that keeps older material fresh in your mind
- more than a dozen **interactive learning activities** that build listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills

GET MY FREE TRIAL NOW