

TOP 10 TIPS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

HELPFUL ADVICE FOR
SELF-GUIDED LEARNERS

LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE IS CHALLENGING. SO IS TEACHING ONE.

When you're a self-guided language learner, you must fill the roles of both student and teacher. In some ways, this is an advantage; you can work on your own schedule, using methods tailored to your own learning style. But without the structure of a classroom setting, you need a solid plan of attack. You need to create your own curriculum.

The team of linguists and instructors at Transparent Language has written this eBook to help you structure your self-guided learning efforts for the most efficient use of your time, and the most successful outcome.

Good luck, and happy language learning!



TOP 10 TIPS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

1. ASSESS YOUR GOALS
2. CREATE A GAME PLAN
3. BUILD YOUR VOCABULARY
4. BALANCE YOUR LEARNING
5. FORM A HABIT
6. USE TECHNOLOGY
7. MIX IT UP
8. TRACK YOUR PROGRESS
9. FORGIVE YOURSELF IF YOU FALTER
10. NEVER STOP



TIP 1:
ASSESS
YOUR
GOALS

ASSESS YOUR GOALS

In any endeavor, it's hard to accomplish your goals if you don't know what they are. That's why many professionals will start by questioning their clients about their motivations and reasons for being there. For example, a personal trainer at a fitness center will probably spend part of your first session going over whether you're there to build muscle, lose weight, or prepare for a specific competition. The same kind of evaluation can be useful for language learners, too, but if you're learning on your own, you'll have to do some self-assessment.

When you first consider learning a new language, take a moment and look at your motives. Knowing why you want to learn will help you shape your learning strategy. Sometimes, it's helpful to ask yourself a series of questions.



ASSESS YOUR GOALS

Self-Assessment Sample Questions

- Are you interested in language learning for career advancement, or just to be able to carry on simple conversations for an upcoming trip?
- Do you just want to learn to read the language, or do you envision speaking with natives? (Either way, it's important to practice speaking, but more on that later.)
- If your goal is a specific event (a trip, a convention, etc.), how much time do you have to prepare?
- Is your focus going to include a specific set of specialized or industry-based vocabulary?



ASSESS YOUR GOALS

Learning Goal	Focus on
A vacation	Common tourist scenarios. Don't worry about perfection, just focus on communicating the basics. If you're studying a script language, try to learn common road and travel signs you might encounter.
A school requirement	Parts of speech and conjugation exercises are more important if your goal is to pass a standardized language test. For a balanced approach, incorporate all 4 language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing).
A specific job or specialized field	Relevant vocabulary and phrases specific to your area of interest. Start with the critical basics you'll use.
To converse	Audio, and pronunciation practice. You won't feel comfortable speaking a language without practicing out loud. Try to find a speaking partner to practice with.
To understand spoken language	Audio material, of which there is plenty. YouTube is your friend. Also incorporate podcasts, news channels, and international radio. Listen anywhere and anytime you can. This will help you get comfortable with the cadence and speed of spoken language.
To read foreign documents	Prioritize reading activities over audio-based activities. Newspapers are a wonderful source to tap for practice. For script languages, try and identify if your target material will be in transliterated or script form.
For personal enrichment	A well-rounded approach. Cover all the bases, but focus on what best engages you; what you find most fun! Create a study plan, and identify ways to maintain your motivation in the absence of a time-sensitive goal.



ASSESS YOUR GOALS

There are many great reasons to learn language, and your reason will affect which parts of the language you focus on, what content you need to learn, and how you set up your timeline.

Note: Your goal should not be “to become fluent in a language”. That's a lifelong journey. Instead, create an end goal and sets of sub-goals that are finite and attainable. Achieving goals will help keep you motivated, and motivation is a crucial piece of self-guided learning.



TIP 2:
CREATE A
GAME PLAN

CREATE A GAME PLAN

Once you've figured out your goals, you can start making a plan to reach them. Figure out when you're going to start learning, decide on a timeline, and organize your resources. Challenge yourself, but be realistic and specific about how much time and energy you're willing to commit to learning.

“I find it helpful to have students attach target dates to benchmarks and enter those targets on a calendar. It helps them to maintain focus and momentum.”

– Karen Olson, Lead Online Instructor, Transparent
Connect



CREATE A GAME PLAN

Remember, as an independent learner, you are in many ways both teacher *and* student, so your game plan should lay out *how* you're going to learn, in addition to *what* and *when*. Everyone learns differently, so once again, take a moment to reflect on yourself, and your preferred ways of learning.

If you learn best on your own, think about regular times you could block off that will give you the peace and quiet you need. If you draw energy from dynamic environments and collaborating with others, work that into your learning strategy. Transparent Language has created [dozens of communities](#) on Facebook and Twitter for this very purpose. Join a group of fellow language lovers and benefit from an environment of mutual enthusiasm.



CREATE A GAME PLAN

It's also popular these days to find native speakers on Skype who are just as interested in practicing your native language as you are in practicing theirs, and strike up a partnership. Forming such alliances can be invaluable.

At the same time, consider what resources you have available, or may want to acquire. Do you have, or want to have, a book? Language software? An audio course? A live or online class? Many people find they learn well with a combination of different methods. When you've thought it all through, gather all the resources you can find into your own customized plan of instruction. Think of your plan and your resources as your learning toolbox.



TIP 3: BUILD YOUR VOCABULARY

BUILD YOUR VOCABULARY

“While without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”

– David Wilkins, *Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 1972



BUILD YOUR VOCABULARY

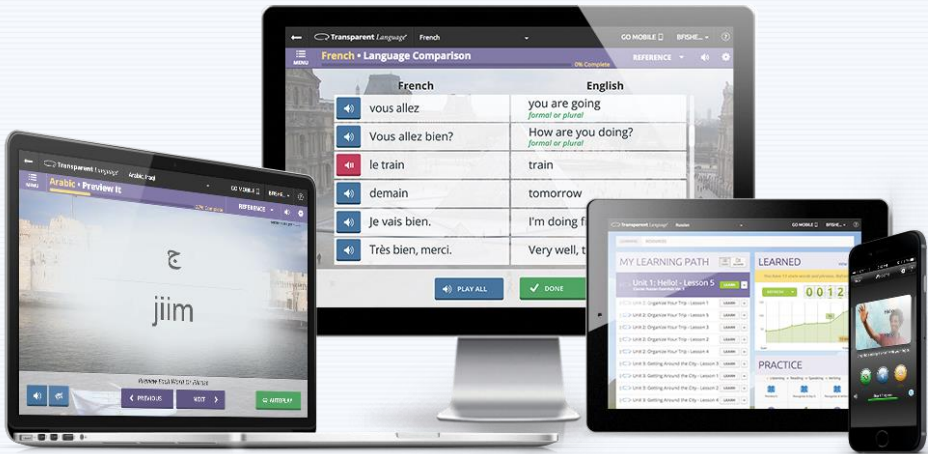
As British linguist David Wilkins once said, “While without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” What does that mean? Simply put, it means that you can't say anything without words. If two language students walk into a foreign grocery store looking for a healthy snack, which is going to have better results; the one who knows how to conjugate “to find” in all its forms... or the one who knows the word for “apple”?

That's not to say that grammar isn't important at all to language learning - of course it is. But words and phrases remain the basic building blocks of a language. For that reason, the best way for an adult to learn a new language is often to start by amassing a reservoir of vocabulary items. This declarative method is the fastest way to lay a solid language-learning foundation.



BUILD YOUR VOCABULARY

Remembering all the new vocabulary may be a challenge, but fortunately, it doesn't need to be boring or difficult. The key is finding a learning method that provides a fun, engaging environment so you can concentrate on the words and phrases you need to know. For example, Transparent Language Online uses a variety of interactive, game-like activities with a built-in algorithm that shows the items that you are struggling with more often than the ones you easily mastered, so you don't waste your time drilling words you already know.



You can put our algorithm to the test in [Transparent Language Online](#) (which you may be able to find free in [a library near you.](#))



TIP 4:
BALANCE
YOUR
LEARNING

LISTEN
SPEAK
READ
WRITE

BALANCE YOUR LEARNING

When setting goals, you may decide that certain aspects of the language are more important than others. For example, you may be learning a foreign language for a vacation trip, with no real intention of writing it. Or maybe you just want to read some classic literature in the original language, and have no intention of carrying on a spoken conversation with anyone. That's fine, and you can certainly customize your language learning to focus more heavily on the skills that are important to you.

However, that doesn't mean you should entirely ignore the other areas. Just as a balanced diet includes a variety of food groups, an effective language-learning strategy involves elements from all four major skill areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Even if you choose one or two of these to make up your “main course”, so to speak, you should always make sure you at least sample the others.



BALANCE YOUR LEARNING

Why? Because a well-rounded approach that covers all four aspects engages your brain far more effectively than only one or two aspects, reinforcing memorization and helping you retain the information more solidly long-term. While it's important to identify your preferred learning style, going out of your comfort zone is paramount to language acquisition.

Typing or writing new words helps the brain visualize them later on, even if you don't need to produce them again while on vacation. Listening to new words, of course, is just as critical to proper pronunciation as speaking. Reading a well-written article or novel will provide countless new vocabulary words that you can employ when speaking.



TIP 5: FORM A HABIT

FORM A HABIT

At the same time, there's more to a healthy lifestyle than just choosing a balanced diet, and there's more to language learning than just selecting the right activities - you actually have to do your exercises. And just like going to the gym, you'll get the best results if you make your practice a regular habit. Try to study a little each day, whether it's a full lesson or a single word, like that offered in Transparent Language's Word of the Day service.

“One thing I suggest in forming the study habits is to start small,” advises Transparent Connect Lead Instructor Karen Olson. “I love the phrase 'one degree of change per day' toward the larger goal. I recommend that students make deals with themselves to help form a regular learning habit. 'Today, I'll learn one list of vocabulary. That's all I need to do. Just 10 minutes. Then, tomorrow, I'll learn one more...’”



FORM A HABIT

Scheduling will really help you do this, too. If you block out 30 minutes of your day in Outlook or set a calendar reminder on your mobile phone to do a little language learning at a regular set time, you have effectively created an automated personal trainer to help you progress.

There's some really good information on HowStuffWorks.com about [the science of habits](#). A key piece of advice we see echoed here and elsewhere is to take small steps, and only focus on one habit at a time. Don't overwhelm yourself; that's good advice.

Tip: Set up your own personal nag system. Sites like <http://habitforge.com/> were built to coach you along with email reminders and progress tracking.



TIP 6: USE TECHNOLOGY

USE TECHNOLOGY

That brings up the next point: using technology to further language learning. Resources have changed radically over the past decade. Encyclopedias are all but a thing of the past in the face of the information superhighway. Mobile devices put a world of resources at our fingertips, no matter where we are or what we're doing. You can use these advances to optimize your own language-learning methods.



USE TECHNOLOGY

One advantage of technology is that it is highly adaptive to the learner. You can choose activities based on your own preferences and learning styles. Some examples:

- Blogs and audio podcasts
- Mobile apps
- Language games
- Foreign language websites
- Online radio stations
- Online social communities (Facebook, Twitter, Google Communities, Ning)
- Video sites like YouTube
- Chat programs like Skype



USE TECHNOLOGY

Technology can also solve two common learning challenges: time and location. In other words, the learning comes to you now, regardless of where or when you choose to study. Learn on the bus. Review in the middle of the night, from the comfort of your own bed. Listen at the gym, and accomplish your fitness goals at the same time. Recapture that five minutes of waiting time in the waiting room at the dentist. Remember, too, that even in the most remote areas of the world, technology can provide material to further your study efforts. Take a mobile language app with you on a trip, and look up exactly the words you need. All those little moments of lost time add up. Why not put them to good use?

Tip: Transparent Language has created a free Mobile Language Guide full of resources to help you learn a language on your mobile device. [Get it here.](#)



TIP 7: MIX IT UP

MIX IT UP

To continue the gym analogy from before, one very effective workout approach is cross-training. This approach uses varied workout routines to keep the body from adapting too much to any given set of exercises, which can cause them to become ineffective. You can use the same concept when learning a language - whenever you find your current activities aren't holding your attention like they used to, mix things up a little. Not only will adding variety to your learning strategy give your brain new angles and relevancy links, it also keeps things fun!

Don't just learn language in the traditional textbook style; explore it, embrace it, revel in it. Try language activities that require a total physical response (think “Simon Says”). Read a foreign language newspaper or watch your favorite movie with foreign subtitles/audio on.



MIX IT UP

Be social. Chances are, if you're learning a language on your own, you're doing most of the work, well, on your own. One of the best ways to mix up your language learning journey is to share it with someone else.

Finding a workout buddy to share those early mornings at the gym with will keep you going. The same applies to language learning. Not only will they give you new opportunities to practice the language, but your friend will also hold you accountable for reaching your goals.

Join a foreign language book club or find Twitter accounts that tweet in your language of interest and respond as often as you can. Drive out of your way to attend a foreign film screening in the big city. Attend cultural events and reach out to people who share your interest in the language. It's easy to ignore a textbook, but so much harder to ignore a friend who is counting on you.



MIX IT UP

Don't forget to take some time to look beyond the language. Learning about culture is an important part of the full experience. Ignoring culture means learning language without the context. Transparent Language hosts dozens of [language blogs](#), written by native speakers, educators, and learners, to help provide the elements of culture and current events that will make your learning experience richer and more rewarding.



TIP 8: TRACK
YOUR
PROGRESS

TRACK YOUR PROGRESS

In any long-haul project, tracking your progress is important both for motivation and assessment. Just as you might weigh yourself periodically as part of a fitness program, you should give yourself regular progress reviews as part of your language-learning process, especially if you're your own teacher. Taking a proficiency test or quizzing yourself on vocabulary terms are great ways to review. Or go even further... arrange to have a conversation with a native speaker and see if you can hold your own. Try reading an article from today's foreign language newspaper. Did you understand it? Try the same exercise on a regular basis, and you'll see yourself improving. It's also excellent practice.



TRACK YOUR PROGRESS

Some programs can also help you track your progress automatically. For example, many Transparent Language programs contain a “learned items” feature which keeps track of all the vocabulary you've learned, and prompts you to refresh it as needed. It's also a great way to look back on how far you've come. (Hello, motivation!)



TRACK YOUR PROGRESS

In addition to computer-assisted tracking, you may want to keep a good old-fashioned journal about your progress. Looking back at notes and thoughts you wrote down can be a moving experience. There's something about a tangible object like a journal, too, that adds a note of realness to what you're doing.

Writing things down also helps you practice, so we recommend keeping a language journal. Besides, it's fun!



TIP 9:
FORGIVE
YOURSELF IF
YOU FALTER

FORGIVE YOURSELF IF YOU FALTER

Forming a good habit takes time, and life constantly introduces new distractions that threaten to shake your focus. But you wouldn't abandon the idea of healthy eating forever just because you once forgot to eat your broccoli. Likewise, you shouldn't get dejected if you find yourself slipping out of the habit of language learning at times.

Don't worry. Faltering is not failing. Your prior progress is still there; you just need to pick it up again.

If you find you've gotten out of the language habit, make a date with yourself to dive back in. Revisit what worked, and maybe try something new to re-spark your interest. You may be surprised at how quickly things come back to you.



FORGIVE YOURSELF IF YOU FALTER

Forgive yourself, but don't forget. Once you get back into the habit, how do you avoid falling out if it again? Determine the factors that contributed to your downfall the first time around and address them directly.

Did you not have enough time to get to your textbook lessons each night? Try a mobile app or an audio program and learn in your dead time (waiting in line, riding the bus, sitting in the car, etc.). Were rigid course lessons about tenses and moods boring you? Step back from that approach. Pick up a book that interests you and learn the tenses in context as you go.

Just as you should track your progress in the language, you should take note of your pitfalls as well. Observing and reacting to the highs and lows of your learning will keep you on track.



TIP 10:
NEVER STOP

NEVER STOP

Like healthy living, learning a language is not a finite goal. It's a life-long aspiration. Even if you've spent your entire life speaking English, there are probably hundreds of words you don't know the meaning of, or have never used. This situation is even more likely to be true for a foreign language - there's always some quirky new term to learn or an exciting new aspect to explore.

Fear not, though, this doesn't mean you need to read textbooks for the rest of your life. As you progress in your new language, you will likely transition from *studying* it to *speaking* it. When someone asks a question, the response will come automatically. You'll actually understand most of that podcast you've been listening to idly. You'll lose yourself in the plot of a novel, without the interruption of too many unfamiliar words. Even when you've reached this level of mastery, stay curious and continue to challenge yourself and set goals.



NEVER STOP

At the end of the day, though, language learning is more about communication than mastery. It's about enriching your own life and broadening your horizons, and you don't need to be perfectly fluent to start doing that. Focus on enjoying the journey, one word at a time. One of the most important pieces of advice you can get is simply to have fun with it. If you're enjoying what you're doing, all the other pieces will usually fall into place.



LANGUAGE RESOURCES

LANGUAGE RESOURCES

At Transparent Language, we've always shared the same goals and priorities as you. We want to offer everyone an affordable way to learn a new language. Below are some resources we offer to help you with your language learning efforts.

Social Communities

www.transparent.com/language-resources

We host Facebook and Twitter communities for learners of 30+ languages.

Language and Culture Blogs

blogs.transparent.com

To keep your learning experience fresh and current, we offer language and culture blogs written by native speakers and language experts.

Free Language Proficiency Tests

www.transparent.com/language-resources/tests.html

Measure your command of a language with our free language proficiency tests. Available for 15 languages.

Transparent Language Online

www.transparent.com/personal/transparent-language-online.html

More than just a course, Transparent Language Online is our online language learning platform available in 100+ languages.

