Feeling Stuck? Try These 5 Weird Techniques to be a Better Language Learner

*By Dorothy Potter Snyder*

Beginning to learn *a new language is* fun*! You’ve got nothing to lose and everything to gain. But what if you’ve taken lots of classes and you still feel like a beginner? What if you’re that “eternal intermediate”, frustrated because you can’t up your game enough to* really converse*?*

*As an experienced Spanish* tutor, *I’ve seen this a lot. But learning Spanish, or any other language, isn’t just about memorizing flashcards and studying grammar: achieving fluency also depends on developing positive emotional and physical behaviors. I’d like to share some of my* student*-tested behavioral techniques to help you locate your resistance points, and develop new language-learning* habits *to break through to the next level.*

# Before class: practice the yoga of language.

Well, okay, maybe it’s not high-level yoga, but these simple exercises contribute to mindfulness and relaxation at the start of every language-learning session, either with your tutor or at home before studying. A relaxed body encourages a relaxed mind, and a relaxed mind is a receptive mind. **First, stretch**: Try the s[unrise/sunset pose](http://www.parents.com/fun/activities/indoor/yoga-for-kids/). From a standing position, raise your arms high in the air and then bend from the waist, allowing your upper body to just dangle towards the ground, breathing deeply. Release your breath slowly, allowing your head and hands to fall closer to the floor with every out-breath. When you’re feeling chill, sit down in your chair, and **sit up straight and smile**. Good posture makes you more alert, and [smiling actually makes you happier](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/smile-it-could-make-you-happier/). And happy people are more receptive to new information!

# Before class: do vocal warmups in the target language.

Want your Spanish to sound like… *Spanish*? Vocal warm-ups before your learning session tunes-up your tongue so your *castellano* is more convincing. The music of Spanish comes from the characteristic way vowels and certain consonant combinations sound. Start with long vowel emissions: A E I O U -- the Spanish versions, of course! Then try some [elementary Spanish tongue-twisters](https://youtu.be/CkSBxV-WcyU), beginning slowly for accuracy and then saying them faster and faster. After challenging yourself to tongue-twisters in your target language, speaking normally with your tutor will seem a whole lot easier!

# In class: Consciously employ positive reinforcement.

I don’t know how many times one of my students makes an error and then makes it worse by wailing, “I *always* make that mistake!” Guess what? Negative affirmations won’t move the needle one millimeter forward. When you make a mistake, receive your tutor’s correction, and then pause to say out loud: “I always get (whatever the thing is) right,” or “Now I know the preterit of *tener* is *tuve*,” -- or whatever is applicable to the lesson at hand. Slapping your forehead in frustration and saying, “I can *never* remember that word!” is a great way to teach your brain that it can’t learn. On the other hand, taking the time to say out loud “I know that *por* means ‘by’ as well as ‘because’” is positive reinforcement that engenders real progress. Also, when you say something beautifully and correctly in the target language, take a victory lap! Successes should be celebrated and reiterated: repeat your successes many times to reinforce correct speech patterns. Ask your tutor to hold you to a gold standard of positivity, and to point out to you when you’re displaying negative patterns.

# In-class: Finish your thought – by any means possible.

Not all tutors agree with me on this idea, but I believe that developing the habit of finishing your thoughts by any means possible is a creative language-learning practice. Remember: language is for communication! So if you’re missing one key vocabulary word to complete a thought, simply finish your sentence using a real object, a gesture, or even a word in English in place of the word you don’t know. Then, when your tutor suggests the word you were missing, repeat the sentence, adding the new information. This way, you train yourself to keep talking, which is one of the key characteristics of fluency. Also, by practicing this method, you move the classroom discussion along, and quickly help your tutor understand what you need to know. Remember: To learn any new language and to communicate in the real world, the only wrong answer is silence.

# Anytime: Can’t say it? Trying singing it!

Yes, I’ve saved the weirdest technique for last, and, no, you don’t have to be Pavarotti to try it! Did you know that [when stutterers sing, they don't stutter](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVcIj2eXAPc)? That’s because singing uses a different part of the brain (the right side) from speaking (the left side). When I discovered that interesting brain fact, I immediately applied it to my teaching. Now when pronunciation problems come up in a session, my student and I *sing* the word or phrase. Soon, we’re both laughing, and what was an obstacle is now a piece of cake! On your own time, sing verb conjugations or vocab lists while jogging or walking. Make up your own melodies or use a favorite pop song. This is a great way to reinforce the sound of your target language when you’re practicing at home and have no one to talk with.

One of the biggest benefits of taking lessons with a private tutor is that you don’t have to put up with boring and ordinary. You don’t have to be a wallflower in a big group. *You* drive the goal-setting in your class, and *you* can also to some degree drive the method. It’s a sign of quality teaching when tutors listen to their students and make sure that the atmosphere, method and content of the class meets the student’s real life goals and style of learning. Try some of these techniques with your tutor, and you’ll see: you’ll be “stuck” no more.

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