

Making the most of Your language learning

A short guide

Alison Fenner
Teaching and Learning Co-ordinator
Institution-Wide Language Programme
(IWLP)

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How to become a successful language learner

In this section you will find a lot of ideas on how to improve your language skills.

This advice will help you:

- a) to tackle the set tasks during your language course;
- b) to develop your language skills through independent learning outside the classroom. Reflecting on your own strengths and weaknesses will help you to focus your effort where it will most benefit you. Effective independent study will improve both individual skills and your overall performance, and it will also increase your enjoyment of language learning.

What is a good language learner?

Anyone can become a good language learner! A number of studies have tried to define which characteristics contribute to good language learning, and the consensus of opinion is that good language learners:

- are self-reliant, ready to work independently and take charge of developing aspects of their own learning;
- are motivated and enthusiastic;
- have a positive view of the target language and its culture;
- play an active part in class activities (and language-learning activities outside class);
- are not afraid of making mistakes;
- practise as much as they can!

Learning to think in the target language

This is mentioned several times in the ideas below. It may not be easy at first, but thinking in the foreign language is worth cultivating as a vital skill which will improve all areas of your language learning. To help you think in the target language, carry on a dialogue with yourself in that language e.g. when walking along, sitting on a bus, taking a break from other studies, whenever you can. Comment on what you can see or on what you have done today, for example, or summarise the main points from a topic you have studied recently. As your knowledge of the language progresses and your vocabulary grows, you will find that you can say more and more. The sense of achievement which you will have will boost your motivation and encourage you further.

Developing the skills of vocabulary acquisition, reading, listening, speaking and writing

Learning/Extending Your Vocabulary

1. Find out what kind of learner you are in order to choose a method which works for you. How do you memorise best? Does it help you to read words out loud while looking at the written form, then to cover the word and say it again from memory, checking afterwards that you have got it right? Is it useful to carry out the above activity and then to write the word down from memory, again checking that you have got it right?
2. Other ideas for learning vocabulary: some people who find it useful to have a visual stimulus write the new vocabulary on post-its and stick them around the room, so that they see (and say) the words frequently. Others record the words and play them when, for example, they are walking or travelling, repeating what they hear. It can be effective to write a small amount of vocabulary on a number of index cards; each amount of vocabulary feels manageable, and the cards can be kept in a box, added to and revisited regularly to revise. Categorise your vocabulary according to topic.
3. It is very important to revise as much vocabulary as possible on a regular basis. Frequent short sessions of vocabulary learning, revisiting what you have learnt and adding new words and phrases, are more effective than occasional long sessions.
4. Define your goals. Learn a certain number of phrases or words associated with a topic per day or study session, and try to stick to your plan.
5. Which form should you learn vocabulary in? When you learn a word, you should also learn whatever you need to know about it e.g. its gender or plural, depending on the language. It can be helpful to learn the word not only as an individual unit but as part of a sentence, to give it context. So write out the sentence where you came across the word as well as the word itself and learn them both. This will help to increase your vocabulary further by learning the associated words.

6. Since it may appear daunting to have large amounts of vocabulary to learn, distinguish between **active use** (in speaking and writing) and **receptive use** or recognition (in listening and reading). Your receptive store of vocabulary will be larger than your active store. You need to have more accurate knowledge of your active store.
7. Use your new vocabulary actively. Talk to another student (or your mp3 player!) about the topic whose vocabulary you have been studying, or write a short piece about it.

Developing your reading skills

1. Look carefully at the question or task. It's easier to read the text if you have a focus for your reading.
2. Use context clues. What is the title? Are there pictures and/or sub-titles which can give you clues and help you to predict the content of the passage?
3. **Skim** through the passage without a dictionary to pick up the general gist, then **scan** it to extract specific information. Try to guess words from their formation or their similarity to words in your own language (although be careful, this can be misleading). Read through the passage again, **highlighting** any real problems. Now that you have made a general assumption about at least some of the meaning of the passage, you can reach for your dictionary. You don't have to look up or understand every single word; try to evaluate which words are the most important for your understanding. Check whether your initial assumptions were correct.
4. Use grammatical clues to help your understanding, such as tenses. Look at the shape of the sentence. Where are the verb and the subject? Ask yourself 'Who does what to whom'?
5. Read as many authentic texts as you can. Easy and more difficult readers can be found in SACLL and the library. Look at the SACLL website; there are lists of reading resources in several languages on the website, with indications of the levels of language involved. Read newspapers, books, magazines. Pick out something which interests you, and make reading a pleasure!

6. Use what you have read to produce written or spoken language. Summarise what you have read in note form, or talk to someone else (or yourself, or your mp3 player) about what you have read. This will help to embed the new topic vocabulary and structures in your memory and will help you to feel that you are really on the way to mastering a new topic.

Developing Your Listening Skills

1. Listening skills are needed for a variety of situations e.g. listening to CDs, watching films, listening to the radio or to native speakers in real life situations, listening to other students in class or to your tutor. A conversation always consists of **listening** as well as **speaking**. Listening effectively helps you to respond appropriately.
2. Be aware of what your aims are. In general conversation you might listen out for the gist, whereas in a specific situation such as asking about train departure times you would need to listen for specific information. It is often easier to listen for the answer to a specific question since you already have an expectation of the kind of answer you may get.
3. Try to learn a variety of phrases in the target language so that you can ask the speaker to speak more slowly, to repeat what he or she has just said etc.
4. When listening to recorded material, gather as much information as possible from the context and the introduction, so that you can make some initial assumptions about the content of the passage.
5. Take note of the tone of voice used by the speakers, or their intonation, as further clues to meaning.
6. Listen to the whole passage first to get the gist and check your assumptions, then listen to it in shorter sections.
7. It is not usually necessary to understand every single word. In fact, trying to do so may hinder you because, while you are trying to puzzle out every word, the conversation or passage will have moved on and you will have missed the next part. Decide whether you need to listen for gist or specific detail and concentrate on what you really need to understand.

8. Listen to the target language as much as possible. You can listen to the course material and/or to a variety of different sources e.g. the radio, films, songs, recordings of plays and readers. Materials can be found in SACLL and the library and on the internet. If there are conversation groups available to you, join them; you will improve both your listening and your speaking skills.

Developing your speaking skills

1. Fluency and confidence come primarily from practising your speaking. Talk to a fellow student over coffee, talk to native speakers if you have the opportunity (conversation groups, if available, can be very helpful), learn poems or songs in the target language. Take every opportunity you can to speak, and have fun!
2. When speaking, try to find a balance between fluency and accuracy. You should of course aim for accuracy, particularly with certain aspects of the language such as tenses where, if you make a mistake, what you say may not make sense. However, it is also important to aim for fluency (as far as possible at your stage of learning), so do not let worrying about more minor points of grammar cause you to hesitate unreasonably. Try to keep the conversation going!
3. The most frequently-encountered problem in speaking is coming up against some vocabulary or a structure which you 'don't know how to say' in the language. This often happens when you try to translate something from your own language word for word into the target language. Practise re-phrasing, altering what you were about to say so that its structure is more simple and uses vocabulary you know. As your language studies progress and you start to think in the target language, you will find this easier.
4. To improve pronunciation and intonation, work with, for example, your course CD. Break a passage down into short sections such as a phrase or sentence and repeat each section after you hear it, trying to reproduce the pronunciation and intonation as exactly as you can. Try recording what you say on your mp3 player and compare it to the original recording. This will help to train your ear and improve both pronunciation and intonation.

5. When preparing for a spoken presentation, practise speaking from bullet points rather than a full script and, when you are practising, speak to an imaginary audience. This will help you to keep your intonation lively and natural. A script 'read aloud' often sounds flat and unnatural and lacks conviction.

Developing your writing skills

1. The secret of successful writing in a foreign language is **not to formulate** it in your mother tongue and then to try to translate it. This can lead to awkwardness, clumsy style and errors. As you learn to think in the target language, your style and accuracy will improve.
2. Read the instructions for the task carefully to find out what is required.
3. Plan the task carefully, fulfilling all the task requirements. Structure it so that you include an effective introduction and conclusion as required. Note down any ideas, vocabulary or structures that you want to use.
4. Collect target language expressions on how to introduce a topic, express contrasting arguments etc.
5. Write your essay, taking care to include any grammar structures specified (try to include an effective variety of vocabulary and structures). Keep to the word limit. Be aware of the register required by the task.
6. Check for accuracy. It may help you to check one aspect of the language at a time e.g. check your work for tenses and verb endings, then for genders, then for adjective agreements etc. If in doubt about a gender or spelling, check with your dictionary.