

Learning a Second Language

Learning a language is a complex, time-intensive task that requires dedication, persistence, and hard work. If you're reading this, then you probably already know that.

What you might not know is that there are strategies that can help you study more effectively, so that you make the most of your time and energy. This handout first explains some of the key principles that guide effective language learning, and then describes activities that can help you put these principles into practice. Use these tools to create a strategic study plan that helps your language skills grow.

Key principles of language learning

The Basics:

First, let's talk about the basics. Research in this area (called "second language acquisition" in academia) suggests that there are three key elements to learning a new language.

- The first is **comprehensible input**, which is a fancy way of saying being exposed to (hearing or reading) something in the new language and learning to understand it.
- **Comprehensible output** is the second element, and unsurprisingly it means learning to produce (speak or write) something in the new language.
- The third element is **review** or **feedback**, which basically means identifying errors and making changes in response.

Fancy terms aside, these are actually pretty straightforward ideas.

These three elements are the building blocks of your language practice, and an effective study plan will maximize all three. The more you listen and read (input), the more you speak and write (output), the more you go back over what you've done and learn from your errors (review & feedback), the more your language skills will grow.

DO: Create a study plan that maximizes the three dimensions language learning: understanding (input), producing (output), and identifying and correcting errors (review/feedback).

Seek balance

Learning a new language involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, sometimes even a new alphabet and writing format. If you focus exclusively on just one activity, the others fall behind.

This is actually a common pitfall for language learners. For example, it's easy to focus on reading comprehension when studying, in part because written language is often readily accessible—for one thing, you have a whole textbook full of it. This is also true of the three key elements: it's comparatively easy to find input sources (like your textbook) and practice understanding them. But neglecting the other two key principles (output and feedback/review) can slow down language growth.

Instead, what you need is a balanced study plan: a mix of study activities that target both spoken and written language and gives attention to all three key principles.

DO: Focus on balance: practice both spoken and written language, and make sure to include all of the three key principles— input, output, and feedback/review.

Errors are important

Sometimes, the biggest challenge to language learning is overcoming our own fears: fear of making a mistake, of saying the wrong thing, of embarrassing yourself, of not being able to find the right word, and so on. This is all perfectly rational: anyone learning a language is going to make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes will be very public.

The thing is, you **NEED** to make those mistakes. One of the key principles of language learning is all about making errors and then learning from them: this is what review & feedback means. Plus, if you're not willing to make errors, then the amount of language you produce (your output) goes way down. In other words, being afraid of making a mistake negatively affects two of the three key principles of language learning!

So, what do you do? In part, you may need to push yourself to **get comfortable with making errors**. However, you should also look for ways to get **low-stakes practice**: create situations in which you feel more comfortable trying out your new language and making those inevitable mistakes.

For example, consider finding a study partner who is at your level of language skill. This is often more comfortable than practicing with an advanced student or a native speaker, and they're usually easier to find— you've got a whole class full of potential partners!

DO: Learn to appreciate mistakes and push yourself to become more comfortable with making errors.

DO: Create opportunities for 'low-stakes' practice, where you'll feel comfortable practicing and making mistakes.

Spread it out

Studying a new language involves learning a LOT of material, so you'll want to use your study time as effectively as possible. According to research in educational and cognitive psychology, one of the most effective learning strategies is **distributed practice**. This concept has two main components: spacing, which is breaking study time up into multiple small sessions, and separation, which means spreading those sessions out over time.

For example, let's imagine you have a list of vocabulary words to learn. Today is Sunday, and the vocab quiz is on Friday. If you can only spend a total of 30 minutes studying this vocab, which study plan will be the most effective?

(A) Study for 30 minutes on Thursday.

(B) Study for 10 minutes at a time on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

(C) Study for 10 minutes at a time on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday.

(D) Study for 30 minutes on Sunday.

If you look at the total time spent studying, all four options are exactly the same. But research suggests that option C is the most effective way to manage your time: instead of studying the vocabulary all at once, you've spread out the time into several shorter sessions, and you've also increased the amount of time between study sessions. (And yes, this is also why "cramming" isn't a good study plan!)

DO: Break up your study time into shorter chunks and spread those sessions out over time.

Bump up your memory

Memory is a critical part of any kind of studying, and effective memorization is strongly correlated with success in foreign language classes. But if you're not "good at" memorizing things, don't despair! Although people often think of memory as a fixed quality, it's actually a skill that you can improve through deliberate practice.

There's a considerable amount of research on how memory works, as well as a wide range of strategies for improving memory. For example, scientific experiments show that our short-term memory can only hold about 7 pieces of new information at once. So, if you're working on a long list of new vocabulary words, start by breaking it up into smaller chunks, and study one shorter section at a time. Additionally, research also suggests that recall-based study methods are most effective. This means that actively trying to recall information is more effective than simply reviewing information; essentially, self-testing will help you more than re-reading your notes will.

The best way to start working on your memory is to build on the techniques that you already know work for you. For example, if associating a word with a picture is effective for you, then you should incorporate images into your vocabulary practice. However, if you're not sure where to start, here's a "beginner" formula for memorizing a new word: **use the word at least five times the first day that you learn it, then multiple times over the week, at least once every day.**

In addition to figuring out which memorization techniques work best for you, it's also important to actively protect your memory. For example, experiencing a strong emotion has been shown to sharply decrease the ability to memorize unrelated content. (So, if you've just watched a horror movie, it's probably not a great time for vocabulary review!)

To get the most out of your study time, here's a list of common "memory killers" to **avoid**:

Stress and anxiety: Just like other strong emotions, stress and anxiety drastically reduce your ability to make new memories and recall information.

Information overload: Studying for hours at a time might seem like a great idea, but it's actually a really ineffective use of time. In fact, taking a short break every 30 minutes helps improve focus, and after 2 hours you should consider switching topics.

Fatigue: The more tired you are, the less effective your memory is. Chronic sleep deprivation is particularly detrimental, so those late-night study sessions might actually do more harm than good!

Multitasking: As you may have noticed, all of these “memory killers” are also things that disrupt focus. Multi-tasking is probably THE most common source of distraction. In fact, here’s a great rule of thumb for protecting your memory: if you’re not supposed to do it while driving, then you shouldn’t do it while studying. (Yes, that means drinking, texting, and watching Netflix “in the background” are all NOs.)

DO: Increase memorization by breaking information into small chunks and studying the chunks one at a time, and by using recall-based strategies like self-testing.

DO: Focus on protecting and improving your memorization skills and build the memory techniques that work best for you into your study plan.

Vocab is king

Want to know a secret? Vocabulary is more important than grammar.

DISCLAIMER: This does NOT mean that grammar is unimportant. Without grammar, you won’t know how to use your vocabulary, since grammar tells you how to combine words into sentences. And obviously, if you’re in a foreign language class, you’re going to need to study ALL the material to do well, and that will definitely include grammar.

The more vocabulary you know, the more quickly you can grow your language skills. The reason is simple: understanding more words directly translates into more input, producing more words means more output, and more output means more opportunity for feedback. Additionally, when you’re trying to interact with native speakers, vocabulary is more beneficial to communication than grammar is. Being able to produce words will help get your meaning across, even if what you say is not perfectly grammatical.

Of course, in order to become fully fluent in your new language, eventually you will need strong grammar skills. But once again, this is something that having a strong, well-developed vocabulary will help with. Since grammar dictates relationships between words and phrases, understanding those smaller components (aka vocabulary) will help improve your understanding of how those grammatical relationships work.

DO: Design a study plan that emphasizes vocabulary.

Activities

Now that we’ve talked about the general principles that you should incorporate in your language study, let’s focus on activities: practical suggestions to help you find new ways to grow your language skills!

Find real-life sources

Since one of the main 3 components of language learning is input, look for ways to expose yourself to as much of the language you're learning as possible. But this doesn't mean reading more textbooks (unless your textbook is a fascinating read that you're excited about). Instead, look for "authentic" examples of the language, things you'll actually enjoy and look forward to practicing with, even if you don't understand every word!

Here are some examples to get you started:

Newspaper articles, magazines, & blogs: Many of these are freely available online, and once you've tried reading them a few times, it's easy to translate the key parts to check your understanding. Look for a topic you're already interested in and follow it with a news reader app!

Books: Children's picture books and books you've read before in your native language are easy options for intermediate/advanced beginners. The library often has great options available for free!

TV shows and movies: Try watching them without subtitles the first time, starting in ~15 minute segments. Another great option is to watch first without any subtitles, then with subtitles in the language you're learning, and then finally with subtitles in your native language if you need them. Soap operas are also great options (especially if you like lots of drama!), since the plot lines are often explained multiple times.

Songs: Music, especially popular songs, can be especially well suited to language practice, since you're likely to memorize the ones you enjoy. Ask a teacher or native speaker for recommendations if you're struggling to find good examples. Children's songs can also be fun practice tools.

Podcasts and audio books: There are a lot of options for all sorts of languages, and as a bonus you'll often get exposure to local news and cultural topics. To get you started, we recommend [openculture.com/freelanguagelessons](https://www.openculture.com/freelanguagelessons) which has a great list of podcasts for many different languages.

Also, consider tweaking some of your media settings to "bump up" your casual language exposure. For example, changing your Facebook and Instagram location and language preferences will force you to interact with the language you're learning, even when you're (mostly) wasting time.

Pro Tips

Improve the effectiveness of this activity by using the following suggestions!

Slow it down: If you're listening to a podcast or audio book, try slowing down the speed just a bit: 0.75x is a common option, and the slowed-down audio still doesn't sound too strange. Also, make sure to take breaks frequently to help you process what you've just heard.

Combine your senses: In many cases, you can combine types of input to help create a more learning environment: reading and listening to a text at the same time can help you improve your comprehension. For example, for TV shows and movies, turn on subtitles in the same language. Other options include:

- Radio news stories often have both audio and transcripts available online, especially for pieces that are a few days old.
- TED talks come in many different languages, and often include an interactive transcript.
- If you're an ESL student, the [ESL Bits website](#) has some great resources that link reading and listening, and it also has adjustable audio speeds!

Get hooked: To make this strategy as effective as possible, find a source that you really enjoy, and commit to experiencing it only in the language you're learning. Having a go-to program that you love will help keep you motivated. For example, if you love podcast/radio story programs like "Radiolab" and are learning Spanish, check out "Radio Ambulante."

Hold shadow conversations

A key part of learning a new language involves training your ear. Unlike written language, spoken language doesn't have the same context clues that help you decipher and separate out words. Plus, in addition to using slang and idioms, native speakers tend to "smoosh" words together, which is even more confusing for language learners!^[6] In part, this is why listening to real-life sources can be so helpful (see the previous activity).

However, even beginning language learners can benefit from something called conversational shadowing. Basically, this means repeating a conversation word-for-word, even when you don't know what all of the words mean. This helps you get used to the rhythm and patterns of the language, as well as learn to identify individual words and phrases from longer chunks of spoken language. Another great strategy involves holding practice conversations, where you create imaginary conversations and rehearse them multiple times.

Both of these strategies are great ways to help you learn and retain new vocabulary, and they also increase your language output in a low-stakes practice setting!

Example: If you've got a homework exercise that involves reviewing an audio or video clip, take a few extra steps to get the most benefit:

- After you've listened to the clip once, shadow the conversation in short sections (think ~20-30 seconds). Focus on reproducing the words as accurately as possible, paying close attention to rhythm, intonation, and pacing.
- Once you can accurately shadow the entire clip, then focus on understanding the meaning of the material, and answer any homework questions related to the clip.
- Now, use the same vocabulary to create a new conversation: think of what you would want to say in a real-life situation like this one, and practice it until you can respond confidently to any side of the exchange.

Flashcard Zen

Flashcards are one of the most common tools that language learners use. There a good reason for this: they're easily portable, they're excellent for learning short pieces of information (like new words) and used correctly they're a great recall-based study strategy. However, flashcards are not without problems. For example, it's far too easy to devote excessive time to making elaborately detailed flashcards, and then spend comparatively little time actually using them! The following tips describe ways to use flashcards in a strategic and effective manner.

Less is more

The more time you spend making flashcards, the less time you spend using them...but if you don't make flashcards, then you don't have any to use. The point behind this paradox is that you want to minimize the time and effort you put into the flashcard set-up process. This is a situation where perfectionism can really harm you: if you focus on making absolutely "perfect" flashcards, then you're really just wasting time.

Similarly, you also want to minimize the volume of information you put on each flashcard. Flashcards should not be pages of notes in a smaller format, especially when using them for vocabulary. Instead, each card should have just enough information on it to test your memory. Instead of containing many details, a good flashcard will serve as a "cue" that triggers your memory. This way, you're forcing your brain to work to produce the information, which helps build and maintain strong memories.

Mix it up

Another common flashcard issue is that they promote rote memorization, so that information is divorced from context. But in real life, you'll be using your vocabulary in a wide range of contexts. Only practicing vocabulary in rote drills may end up slowing you down when you need to actually use the words.

One example of this is the "translation" phenomenon: instead of learning to associate new words with their meanings, they become associated with the word in your native language. If you're always translating word-for-word in your head, then it takes much longer to understand and interact. A great way to reduce this issue is to change the type of cues used on your flashcard: instead of written words, you might represent the meaning of new words with a picture— or for digital flashcards, you could even use audio files.

Example: Imagine a beginning student (and native English speaker) learns that the Arabic word for door is "bab" (باب). She could make several different flashcards for this word:

- Traditional flashcard: the written word in Arabic on one side, and in English on the other
- Audio flashcard (digital): the spoken Arabic word on one side, and the spoken word in English on the other
- Pictorial flashcard: a picture of a door on one side, and the word written in Arabic on the other

You can also combine these types to make different hybrid-style flashcards. Once again, don't try to make elaborate, perfect flashcards — just something that will push you to associate words with

meanings, instead of just their translations. Not all of your flashcards have to use non-written cues, but it's a great way to add variety and prevent "translation" memory.

Additionally, make sure to practice using both sides of the flashcards as cues. In other words, if you've already gone through a set of cards starting with the English side, flip the stack over the next time you use it, so that you're getting prompted by the language you're learning.

You can also avoid the pitfalls of rote memorization by making sure to practice using the words in context. For example, in addition to testing yourself with each card, follow that up by using the word in a sentence. This is particularly good for words you've already learned and are now reviewing. You can also turn this into a game, where you make up "mad-lib" style sentences by randomly drawing cards and combining them. If you're working with a partner or study group, you can also use flashcards to play games like charades or Pictionary.

Make it a habit

Ultimately, flashcards are just a tool, albeit one that is ideally suited to vocabulary practice. And as with any kind of practice, the more time you put in, better your results will be: flashcards work best when used frequently and consistently. If you want to get the most out of your flashcards, turn using them into a regular habit. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

Small sets, many reps: To improve memorization when practicing new words, create sets of 7 flashcards or less and practice each set several times before moving on to the next one. Also, make sure to space out your flashcard sessions, and once you've reviewed a set of words, put it aside for a day or two before reviewing it again.

Increase portability: Make sure you take full advantage of the portable nature of flashcards. If you're using paper, then consider using a binder ring and hole punch to keep small sets together. You might also use smaller cards: since you'll be making simple cards (minimalism!), you could probably cut a regular 3"x5" index card into halves (or even quarters) and still have more than enough room! Even if you use full-sized paper cards, you increase portability by being selective in the number you take with you. Remember, you want to space out your sets and reps, so it isn't necessary to carry all your cards with you all the time. If you're using digital tools, look for apps that can sync to all your devices — phone, tablet, computer, web, etc.

Wasted' time: Since flashcards are so portable, they're a great way to turn "wasted" time into useful time. How much time do you spend riding the bus? How about stuck in line at the grocery store, or waiting for an appointment? Instead of checking your Twitter feed or hopping on Facebook, open up your flashcard app (or pull out your flashcard stack) and do a quick vocab review. If you're doing small sets it won't take very long to go through one, and you've just bumped up your number of reps for the day!

Create a routine: Habits are powerful. Once you've established a behavior pattern, you find yourself doing it without thinking about it. So, think about how you can create a daily routine for using your flashcards. Finding and using "wasted" time is a good start, especially if you have a daily bus commute. What about taking 5 minutes every morning to do vocabulary review while you drink your coffee? Or making it your first "after-dinner to do" once you've finished eating? Once you find ways to

make vocabulary flashcards part of your daily routine, you can use the power of habit to help grow your vocabulary.

Periodic review: Once you've learned new words, you're not done with those flashcards— instead, use them to keep your vocabulary strong. Each week, randomly select a few words to review. You might do a review set once each day, or the review words can be mixed in with your current learning sets (this is a great way to keep your word collection going strong!).

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