

HOW TO BE A GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER

Research on the learning of foreign languages consistently shows that the following techniques enhance and facilitate the learning of a language. Students who use them regularly are better prepared to perform well on tests, to carry out spoken and written exchanges, and also to reduce their level of stress during formal learning and evaluation.

ACT AS A STUDENT

- A language course is not limited to a textbook or to time spent in a room with an instructor. It pre-supposes that you work regularly outside classtime (about five to ten hours a week working with and working on the language). Language is, like sports, a performance – you need to train before performing.
- Attendance is important, as it allows for a regular period of dedicated immersion in the language during which you process new words, expression, and structures with no outside interruption.
- Attend classes *prepared*. You need to have covered readings / listening material before you become able to participate during class time.
- Make sure during pre-class preparations that you identify potential stumbling blocks for yourself.
- Remain concentrated on and in the language during class time. Do not allow distractions and interference (probably in English) to sidetrack your learning.
- Be actively engaged during class time: write down expressions and words that you find interesting or striking. Take notes continuously throughout the class (you should end each class meeting with a full page of handwritten notes).
- Participate actively during all classes (lectures and tutorials). Ask at least a question a week. Step forward with an answer, volunteer an opinion or an anecdote, offer a comparison – before instructors call on you to respond.
- Avail yourself of all opportunities for exchanges in the languages: ask for rephrasing and clarification, check your comprehension by re-stating points.
- After each class, preferably on the same day, go over your handwritten notes and organize the material. Go over words that you didn't know before the class with a dictionary. Correct spelling, expand definitions, jot down an example or a cognate, create new lists, etc.
- Keep abreast of the course progression. Courses and textbooks are created with a learning process in mind. Do required exercises at the time when it is relevant to do them.

ACCESS ALL COMPONENTS OF THE COURSE

- Locate all available resources, such as conjugation tables (in your unilingual and bilingual dictionaries, as well as in your textbook) and bookmark them. Access them often.
- Locate resources in the language in the library (most will be grouped together in one section of the library shelving system). Manipulate reference works regularly.
- Make sure that you take advantage of all opportunities to produce language, in speech and in writing. Avoid English during class and study time. Communicate with other students in the course in the same language. Socialize in English separately from your interactions in the target language.
- Read your textbook ahead of classes (highlight important/new concepts and words).
- Review your textbook after classes and complete all available exercises. Many language texts come with complete answer keys and online resources.
- Go over and redo exercises at the end of each unit.
- Consult your instructor(s) during office hours. Face time with instructors is a regularly and easily available way to hear/produce the language while reviewing at the same time. You do not need a reason or difficulty to access your instructors – they will keep office hours in all circumstances.

USE ALL AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Use your instructor, class time, text books, and your own study time in a complementary way.

- Complete extra exercises on covered topics. Many instructors post lists of links or you can also locate supplementary exercises (and lessons) sorted by language learning topic on numerous web sites.
- Complete extra exercises orally and also in writing, in order to train your memory.
- Learn how to use various types of dictionaries and make them work for you - unilingual dictionaries are especially useful during written production, as they allow you to see examples of structures in use, constructions, and expressive usage. Bilingual dictionaries are more convenient for translation and quick checks, for instance when you are given comprehension material to work on before a class.
- Many instructors make use of the course web site and have a "discussion" notice board or a chat function integrated in their course.
- Access all the resources offered by the University, such as language and computer laboratories, movie collections, and the Academic Skills Centre.

PRACTISE & REVIEW

- Practise using the language outside scheduled classes. Create your own opportunities to do so – online, organized with peers, reading out loud on your own, listening to the radio, accessing podcasts, etc.
- Make sure you re-read assigned readings after they have been covered in class. Re-read them out loud, act out dialogues...
- Read out loud material of high quality in the target language (authentic texts, corrected versions of your own assignments, documents issued by your instructors, published texts from the library...). Practice reading in expressive ways, with high speed and meaningful tone, a text that you have already studied. Access recordings of famous texts by well-known actors in the target language. Develop an appreciation for expressive nuances in the target language. Read excerpts from theatrical plays.
- Practise reading about course topics in other venues than the textbook. Use the library as well as online material.
- Access the daily news in the language on a daily basis. Bookmark your favourite news sites, use them as a splash page.
- Identify and research your favourite singers in the target language. Build a collection of their songs on Youtube and check up the lyrics. Sing along.
- Review in tandem with a fellow student with whom you get along. Communicate in the language with him/her. Schedule online chats in the language with him/her. Send each other youtube videos for comment in the language.
- Access jokes in the target language.
- Avail yourself of para-academic opportunities to put the target language to use, in the language societies on campus, accessing community events. Consult your instructor for upcoming events in the GTA.
- Watch movies in the target language (movies that you have seen or not; movies with and without subtitles). Create your own synthesis of covered material, your own summaries, your own overview of a character, your own examples for new words, etc.

ASSESS & ORGANIZE YOUR LEARNING

- Check and monitor that you understand each aspect of covered topics by using the Table of Contents, and overviews and final recaps, in your textbooks.
- Make sure that you don't leave learning to the last evening before a test is scheduled. Performance in a language requires a type of deep learning that cannot take place in one night, cramming in one short burst before a test.
- Plan your reviews ahead of time, as you would schedule an appointment or a class.

- Set aside study time (30 min. / 1h) with no planned interruptions from digital communication technologies (unless they are in the target language!).
- Make sure that you understand what you attempt to memorize (understanding *why* and *how*, before recording *what*).
- Practice with past tests and examinations, in the same conditions. Use grading keys in full to rate your responses in full.
- Use a variety of techniques to make your memory work in the target language: copy out in handwriting, visualise on flashcards, pronounce out loud, use visual and sound rhymes, use mnemonics, read in reverse, scan, hide ends of sentences and complete them, post a list of vocabulary or grammatical points on your fridge...). Use more than one source and more than one sensory mode for the presentation of the same material.
- Do not underestimate the power of copying out in the target language. Copying out creates strong linkages between several learning pathways: your hand (which gets used to forming unusual letter combinations and endings), your eyes (which get used to seeing target language forms for themselves), your brain (which stores linguistic items in your long term memory), your inner voice (which pronounces the target language mentally). Write down, with pen and paper: nouns with their articles, conjugated verbs in the first and second persons, verbs with their prepositions, idioms, important quotations.
- Write in full sentences in the target language. Write out your answers to exercises in full sentences (not just filling in blanks). Copy out corrected forms of texts that you wrote yourself for evaluation purposes in full sentences.
- Make sure that you create your own summary or outline of main points for each unit covered in class.
- Create your own glossary where you will store words and expressions that are new to you alphabetically. Use it to record amusing, unusual, piquant, striking expressions, quotations, sentences.
- Create a list of your favourite quotations in the target language.
- Become aware of what you enjoy doing in the target language. Reward yourself by doing more of it.
- Make sure that you remain motivated to learn more beyond the purpose of receiving grades. Poor preparation usually leads to low levels of success, which in turn leads to a lack of motivation or involvement, and to a further lack of preparation.
- Review past assignments and make sure that you apply suggested and required corrections.
- Be aware of the list of common errors in the target language. Most instructors have such a list handy for you to consult.

KNOW ABOUT LEARNING

- Identify techniques to become a proficient reader, for example by reading English literature (ENG courses). Reading at a high level in a first language will enhance reading in the target language, as you acquire comfort with demanding texts and types of texts, learn to mobilize resources to bypass difficulties, expand your active vocabulary, and develop techniques to cope with unfamiliar words by relying on context, pattern recognition, and educated guesses.
- Expand and consolidate your understanding of grammatical descriptions and terminology, for example by taking a Linguistics course (LIN). It will allow to access descriptions of the language, and to understand what they mean when you access them.
- Use grammar reference works about the target language in English. For French, for instance:
 - Priscilla GAC-ARTIGAS & Gustavo GAC-ARTIGAS. *Sans détour. A Complete Reference Manual for French Grammar*. Upper Saddle River [NJ], Prentice Hall, 2000. [PC 2112.G27 2000]

- Marie-Eva DE VILLERS. *La nouvelle grammaire en tableaux*, 4th Ed. Montréal, Québec-Amérique, 2003. 313p. [PC2105 .V54 2003]
- Find out more about what makes "good language learners" distinct (and successful!). Identify strategies for learning languages. Numerous sites provide useful advice on the learning of foreign languages, suggesting techniques that can be transported across languages:
 - <http://www.lingualearn.co.uk/learners/advice.htm>
 - <http://www.studygs.net/langlearn.htm>
 - <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/questionnaire.html>
 - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_language_learning
 - <http://www.lang.soton.ac.uk/resources/key.html>
 - <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/successful.html>
 - <http://chinesemadeeasier.com/goodll.html> ...

Several good print resources on the topic:

- ❖ Andrew COHEN and Ernesto MACARO (Eds). *Language Learner Strategies: 30 years of Research and Practice*. Oxford, OUP, Oxford Applied Linguistics Series, 2007. 336p. [P118.2 .L364 2007 UTM]
- ❖ Carol GRIFFITHS (Ed.). *Lessons from Good Language Learners*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2008. 324p. [P51 .L498 2008 UTM]
- ❖ J. Michael O'MALLEY and Anna Uhl CHAMOT. *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1990. 276p. [P118.2 .O43 1990 Robarts].
- ❖ Rebecca OXFORD. *Teaching & Researching: Language Learning Strategies*. Toronto, Pearson ESL, 2011. [P53.O94 2011 UTM]
- ❖ Joan RUBIN and Irene THOMPSON. *How to be a More Successful Language Learner*. 2nd Edition. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1994. 120p. [P51 .R8 1994 ERIN]