

Studying Foreign Languages

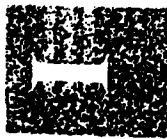
The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is CAPABLE of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension.

Ezra Pound (1885–1972), poet, critic, translator, and editor

Knowing a foreign language gives you direct access to great thoughts, experiences, and cultures that would otherwise be out of reach. Getting someone to translate something for you, reading translations of literature, or watching a foreign film dubbed into English or with English subtitles is like shadow-boxing. It is no way to get the full benefit of the experience.

This chapter gives you some information on learning foreign languages that should put the whole business into perspective. It discusses:

- The challenge of language study
- Learning to listen in a foreign language
- Learning to speak in a foreign language
- Learning to read in a foreign language
- Learning to write in a foreign language
- Getting the most from your textbook
- Getting the most out of class time *and finally*
- Special notes on culture



If you find language courses easy, you may have a special, natural talent, or you may have greater motivation and enthusiasm than many. Even for you, however, learning a foreign language requires a lot of hard work.

THE CHALLENGE OF LANGUAGE STUDY

Language study is different from most other disciplines in that it entails learning both facts and skills. In addition to learning "facts" such as grammar rules and vocabulary, you must learn how to use those "facts" for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. There is a lot of overlap among these skills, but being good at one does not necessarily mean being good at the others (virtually no one is equally good at them all). Knowing this should help you understand why your language study goes better at some times than it does at others. Identifying the skills you are best at and determining how you learn best will go a long way toward helping you use your study time effectively.

Another peculiarity of language study is that learning to use a language well is partly a matter of habit—this is especially true of speaking. You speak your native language fluently, but you don't do so by thinking *about* the language. You didn't even learn it in the first place by "thinking." Instead, you listened to other people and imitated what they said. By doing this over and over again, you eventually developed the habits that allow you to speak with ease. You think not about *how* to use the language, but rather about *what* you are going to say. If your native language is English, for instance, you don't stop to think about saying "he works" (with an -s ending) and "they work" (with no -s ending). Nor do you have to stop to think about pronouncing the word *the* as "thee" in front of words that begin with a vowel ("the apple, the orange") but as "thuh" in front of words that begin with a consonant ("the peach, the banana"). You do things like that as matters of habit. Most of us don't realize that we do this kind of fancy footwork until someone points it out to us or makes an issue of teaching us a "rule."

In order to learn any language, you have to repeat a lot of what you learn over and over again until it becomes second nature to you. When you were learning your native language, you had essentially full-time practice without making any effort. When you try to learn a foreign language, you are handicapped in a couple of ways. First, you are unlikely to have enough time for practice. Second, you already have a set of language habits that are going to interfere with the new habits you are trying to develop. Don't be surprised if your brain has trouble coping at first. It is quite normal for people learning a new language to get their language habits mixed up a bit at first.

If learning a new language seems beyond your reach, remind yourself that every so-called foreign language is native to some people. Granted, the native learner had some advantages that you don't have when you approach a language as a second or other language. The chief advantage is age. Odd though it might seem, it is easiest to learn a language when you are very young. The critical thing to keep in mind, however, is that the language can be and is learned by lots of people—most of them no smarter than you.

Most of us take a very long time to learn our own language well, to use it with a reasonable amount of sophistication. All that listening and imitating takes years! At that rate, there is relatively little time to go through the process a second time, with another language. Besides, by the time you are in school, you are already past the "ideal" age for language learning, so it's too late to learn a new language in quite the way you learned your first. But don't worry, because there is another way to proceed.

You have some rational skills that you didn't have when you were a child, and those skills will help you learn a foreign language. It is true that just plain listening and imitating is harder for you now, but you can be told how the new language is put together, how it works, and how it differs from your native language. The information you are given, the set of instructions and directions on how the language works, can speed up the learning process considerably. When you were a child, you wouldn't have been able to cope with grammar rules at all. The adult's ability to reason, analyze, and systematize is a powerful asset. It is important to make use of your rational capacities, your ability to think about the language.

Thinking about the language and how it works is still not enough, however. Learning grammar is not an end in itself. Rather, mastering grammar is a way to make the imitation you still have to do more successful. If you understand the grammar as an adult and practice repeating and imitating in the way an uninhibited child would, you'll be able to overcome some of the disadvantages of not being a native learner.

LEARNING TO LISTEN IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Although speaking might seem like the most interesting and important skill to learn in another language, proper listening really has to come first. Don't confuse listening with hearing (this distinction is discussed in Chapter 6). You are likely to understand what you hear only when you have learned to listen.

Most of us think when we hear people speaking a language we do not

know that they are talking impossibly fast. Studies of recorded speech have shown, however, that speakers of most languages tend to utter very nearly the same number of syllables per minute when they speak at a normal rate. What makes them difficult to understand is not the speed of their speech, but rather our not knowing where the syllables (or even the words) break. Everything seems to run together. What we hear is like a torrent of sound.

Listening is really a matter of learning to discriminate sounds. In English, for instance, it matters a lot whether there is a *d* or a *t* sound at the end of a word. The word *liad* is not at all the same as *liat*, and you need to listen closely to hear the difference so that you know which word is meant. That seems obvious and easy enough in a case like *had* and *liat*, when you already know the language. But when the language is unfamiliar, you have to pay extra close attention.

English has a lot of word pairs that won't seem similar to you at all, because you know the language, but that could easily be confusing to someone trying to learn the language. Think about *pin* and *pan*, *tin* and *thin*, *sin* and *fin*, *shoot* and *shoot*, *but* and *putt*. The trick in learning a new language is to train yourself to listen carefully to new sounds and sound combinations—and to new words. You need to concentrate especially hard in the beginning so that you can distinguish sounds, syllables, words, and intonation patterns that may turn out to be important in the new language.

Study Tips for Learning to Listen. Rule number one for learning to listen effectively is: Concentrate! Casual listening will result in mere hearing. Rule number two is: Do your listening practice in small doses. This means limiting the amount of time you engage in strict listening practice at any one sitting and limiting the amount you try to accomplish at any one sitting.

If you concentrate hard enough to be doing a good job of listening, you'll probably find it tiring. So give yourself a break by not overdoing it. Fifteen minutes of intensive listening work in a language lab—even when the practice includes repeating as well as listening—is enough for most people. (Thirty minutes of casual listening is nowhere nearly so helpful.) Going to the lab twice a day for fifteen minutes each time may not be efficient or even possible in your schedule, though. So go for a half hour, but at the end of each ten or fifteen minutes stand up and touch your toes three times or do something else to allow your brain to relax for a moment.

Try to concentrate on a small task. If you sing or play an instrument, you may have little trouble discriminating sounds. If you do find it difficult at first to make sense of the sounds and sound combinations in the new language, try breaking the task down. Instead of listening to a sentence with the aim of understanding the whole thing the first time through, listen just for a

particular sound or a particular word. (How many times does it occur?) Then listen again, trying to pick up additional sounds or words.

Of course, in real life you can't play back a tape to listen to a sentence numerous times (though you can—and should—learn how to ask a conversational partner to repeat what he or she has said or to speak more slowly). But at the practice stage, it is both fair and sensible to play things back. Remember, you are trying initially to break down that torrent of sound into discrete elements that make sense to you.

Another strategy is to listen for the gist of what is being said—whether in a sentence, a dialogue, a paragraph, or a story. Even in your native language, you don't necessarily understand (or even hear) every single word. So why hold yourself to such an impossibly high standard in a new language? Eventually, you'll want to get to the point where you can and do get almost every word on the first pass, just as you do in your native language. At first, however, it's excellent practice to see whether you can at least get the drift of what is being said. This is called *global understanding*, meaning that you have a general (not a specific, local) idea of the topic even if you miss most of the details. Learning to get the drift is a crucial part of listening comprehension and an important part of not trying to do too much at once.

Here's how to do it. Listen for familiar words. Try to pick out nouns and verbs. Learn to filter out the little words like articles and conjunctions, at first; even adjectives and adverbs are usually unimportant when you are after global understanding. Learn to watch out for powerful little words like *not*, however, which can significantly alter the meaning. Jot down words and ideas as you catch them (make your notes in the language you are studying). Then go back and listen again. Confirm what you heard by checking what you are listening to against what you jotted down. Try to fill in a few gaps.

For instance, on the first pass you may have understood that John did something, but you may not be sure what he did to whom or when or why. Before listening a second time, decide what additional information you would most like to have, which of your mental question marks it would be most helpful to eliminate. Then listen for that one thing. (What John did is likely to be more important than anything else.) It's possible that the information you are listening for is not in the passage. If you don't get it after a couple of tries, listen for something else. Go back and listen as many times as you need to, until you get all your questions answered.

When you are pretty sure that you understand the whole passage, put your notes aside and listen one more time. Try to let the rhythm and the sounds convey their message to you directly without thinking about the content in English. This is your chance to consolidate your learning (the principle of consolidation is discussed in Chapter 5).

LEARNING TO SPEAK IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Because speaking is the most common, everyday way to communicate with language, it is probably the most useful of the language skills. If you can speak the language, you are almost certainly going to be able to read it, and you will have a solid base for writing as well. By mastering the speaking skill, you will get a leg up on two other skills.

The listening skill is crucial to learning to speak. Listening practice helps you understand others, and it is also important because it provides models for you to imitate in your own speaking.

Remember that language is a set of habits. Grammar rules explain some aspects of the way the language works, but thinking about those rules is not very helpful when you are trying to speak the language. The only way to learn the language is to learn the habits—by repetition, by lots of practice—not think about them. Instead of organizing, analyzing, and interpreting factual data, you must go home and practice the material you've heard in class over and over again until it becomes second nature. That means memorizing.

Children learn languages by imitating first the short phrases and expressions they hear frequently and need most. Those are the kinds of things you will learn first in your new language as well. The more complicated and abstract ideas you are used to being able to express in your native language are likely to be harder; you mustn't expect to be able to talk at the same level in the new language right away. You may feel you've been reduced to the intellectual level of a 10-year-old, for a while. But memorizing carefully what is modeled for you, and resisting the temptation to say things you haven't yet heard, will pay off. You'll end up making fewer mistakes, and you'll establish good foundations for your later language development.

One reason it is so important to limit yourself to the vocabulary and structures that have been modeled for you is that languages do not all work in the same way. Words that look and sometimes even sound alike in two languages do not necessarily mean the same thing. Also, in every language there are idiomatic expressions that cannot be constructed on the basis of rules.

An idiom is an expression with a peculiar, individual cast. It may mean something other than what the sum of its parts seems to imply. "It's raining cats and dogs" has nothing to do with animals, for instance, as every native speaker of English knows. Or an idiom may be the customary way of saying something. You could say "Happy Christmas" and "Merry Birthday," but you don't. The same ideas are frequently conveyed differently in any pair of languages. You and your friends would say in English, "We are hungry and thirsty." In many other languages, people say, "We have hunger and thirst."

You cannot know idioms ahead of time, and you cannot expect to figure

them out. You have to hear the models and imitate them so often that you stop thinking about whether they are different from what you would say in your native language. Idioms have to become second nature through memorization.

Study Tips for Learning to Speak. One of the advantages children have in learning languages is that they tend to be amused by imitating new sounds. Adults, unfortunately, are likely to feel embarrassed by their attempts to say things in a new way. So rule number one in learning to speak a foreign language is: Throw caution to the wind! Try to get a kick out of the new sounds. Use exaggerated facial expressions—use those muscles!—to practice what you are saying. The odds are that the stranger you sound to yourself at first, the closer you are to imitating the new sounds correctly.

Rule number two is: Do all your practice out loud. Some people even say the louder the better—if you are going to make a mistake, make it boldly! Reading material silently is fine if all you are trying to do is understand the content. In doing that, however, you are learning only how the language is symbolized on paper, which doesn't have much to do with speaking. If you are going to develop new oral habits, you need oral practice (review the benefits of recitation discussed in Chapter 5).

There is another reason for practicing out loud. When you read silently, you are using only your visual memory. If you study out loud, you double your efficiency by adding auditory memory. You remember things you have heard *and* seen better than those you have merely seen. Beyond that, saying things out loud means you are adding motor memory, which generally quadruples efficiency. Motor memory is the memory of what you do with your muscles. One indication of its efficiency is that nobody ever forgets how to ride a bicycle.

Another way to put motor memory to work for you is to write out what you are trying to memorize. Read a passage (a sentence, a phrase, a word) out loud; then copy it, saying it again while you write. Now you've got eyes, ears, tongue, and hands all helping your brain. A side benefit of doing oral work this way is that so much of you is involved that you have to concentrate intensively.

Still another parallel exists between learning to listen and learning to speak, and that is the importance of not trying to take on too much at once. Most children are pretty good at memorizing. Adults, however, seem to be much less efficient at memorizing. That doesn't mean they can't do it, just that they have to work at it. The first crucial step in this work is to break material to be memorized into small units.

What counts as small? Some people seem to be able to memorize whole paragraphs easily. Most, however, find even a sentence too much if it is really

new. They need to break sentences into phrases. And if they are tired or the passage is especially difficult, they may need to tackle smaller units than usual. How small depends in part on individuals' learning styles; there is no magic formula.

One trick that works well for most people is to tackle sentences backward. If you learn the end of a sentence first, you'll probably learn it best. Then when you've built up to saying the whole sentence, you'll always be working toward what you know best instead of struggling toward something new. Try it with this sample in English: "I'm going to Paris next summer with my whole family."

Start by figuring out what constitutes meaningful phrases or word clusters. "I'm going / to Paris / next summer / with my whole family." (If the words are especially difficult to say, you could break a sentence like this into even smaller units.) Now practice the last phrase—"with my whole family"—over and over until you can say it easily, without thinking about it. Then practice saying "next summer" until that phrase slips smoothly off your tongue, before you put the two together: "next summer with my whole family." Then work on "to Paris," "to Paris next summer," and "to Paris next summer with my whole family." Finally, you are ready to work on the last phrase (actually the first one in the sentence), "I'm going." Then you build that into the rest of the sentence.

This may sound awfully convoluted, but it takes less time to do than it does to explain. And it does work, if you are patient and systematic. You may want to reserve this technique for particularly long and complicated sentences; you probably won't need to do quite so much repetition with short ones.

Another aspect of breaking your memory work into small units has to do with the amount of time you spend at any one sitting. You should be able to work effectively on oral (speaking) work longer at one time than on aural (listening) exercises. One thing is virtually certain. If you spend two uninterrupted hours trying to memorize new material, you are unlikely to get the most out of your time.

How quickly any one person's powers of concentration diminish depends on lots of factors; you'll need to figure out for yourself how long your attention span is for different kinds of work, how much you can "take." Be honest! It won't help if you are too easy on yourself. You should be able to increase the amount of time you can concentrate as you get better at the language. For starters, try from twenty to thirty minutes at the most. Then do something else: Work on another subject, walk around the block, eat lunch, whatever. But then come back for another twenty- or thirty-minute stint. A couple of hours divided up in this way will produce better results than working straight through for two hours would.

Frequent small doses seem to work well for another reason. Learning a language is a cumulative process. Much of the new material you will be asked to learn as you go along—vocabulary and grammar as well as the conversational patterns you are memorizing—depends on what you have already learned. The new material either won't make sense or will be harder to learn if you have not mastered what went before or have allowed yourself to forget what you have learned. Language teachers sometimes talk about "frequent re-entry" of material, which means bringing old material (things you have already learned) back at frequent intervals. Most language textbooks are written in a way that tries to accomplish this, but you can help yourself by frequent reviewing and by doing assignments quickly, intensely, and more than once.

A final word must be said here about memory work, even though it has to do with aspects of language learning other than just the speaking skill. If you are going to learn to speak a new language as an adult, you have to do more than imitate what others say. Imitating takes too long to be an effective way for busy college students to learn languages. You have to do lots of memorizing of vocabulary, the rules of grammar, and so on. The principles and theories about forgetting discussed in Chapter 5 should be applied. Break your work—lists of words, for instance—into meaningful blocks. Organize words to be memorized in a way that makes sense to you, regardless of how they appear in your textbook. Group them by gender, by subject matter, by parts of speech, by length—whatever works for you.

Above all, try to fit rules of grammar into a context as you work on learning them. In this sense, you *do* need to think; memorizing is not sufficient for the adult language learner. You will help yourself enormously if, as you memorize, you think about the grammatical explanations that go with each bit of new material. The grammatical section of a new lesson may tell you, for example, about verb endings. After you have read the section and have spoken the examples out loud, start memorizing the new material. Every time you say a verb form, fit it mentally into the scheme that has just been explained to you. The ability to think about the structure of the language is the one big advantage you have over a child learning a new language. Make full use of it.

LEARNING TO READ IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

When you read something in your native language, you do not necessarily understand every word, and you certainly don't pronounce each word to yourself. That is worth keeping in mind, because there is a tendency to think

you have to understand everything when you read a foreign language. Instead, the goal you should aim for is the ability to pick up a foreign language text (a book, a newspaper, a brochure) or look at a sign (directions, instructions, advertisements) and understand what it is about just as you would a similar document or bit of writing in your native language.

Just as you probably use different reading techniques in your native language, depending on the type of material and the situation, you need to develop different techniques for reading in a new language. First and foremost, this means thinking about the kind of material you are reading. Just because they are all course assignments does not mean you should look at them all in the same way. The precise meaning of each word is likely to matter more in poetry than in a novel. A close analysis of details is more important if you are going to discuss the relative merits of two proposals than if you are merely reading the minutes of some meeting. Directions on how to put something together need to be read differently from the words of a business letter. Learning to read is not just one kind of activity.

Although reading in a foreign language has a lot in common with reading in your own language, it presents some special challenges. The whole framework of what you are trying to read in another language may be foreign to you, so it's likely to be hard for you to get started. The percentage of unfamiliar words is likely to be uncomfortably high. These problems can be overcome, however. Keep in mind that reading in a foreign language should ultimately be like reading in your own language. It's a way to get information, to be exposed to new ideas, to pass the time pleasurablely. These, not solving linguistic puzzles, are the legitimate goals for this activity.

One thing you will gradually discover is that reading is both easier and harder than listening and speaking. It is easier because when you read you can go back and reread, you can slow down or speed up, you can proceed at your own pace. Conversations don't work that way. On the other hand, when people take the trouble to write out ideas, the ideas tend to be expressed in a more complex way than they would have been in conversation. The ideas themselves may in fact be more complicated. This makes reading a bit of a challenge at times. Don't be surprised if you have to work at your foreign language reading, at least initially. The rewards of succeeding are high. You will be moving steadily toward the point where you can vastly increase the range of information directly available to you.

Study Tips for Learning to Read. Many of the tips given elsewhere in this book on how to read effectively (see especially Chapter 17) can and should be applied sensibly to reading in a foreign language. But since the single biggest hurdle in foreign language reading is usually the unfamiliar vocabulary, it merits special attention. Rule number one for learning to read in a foreign language is: Make sure you don't confuse *translating* with *reading*.

The whole point of learning to read in a foreign language is to avoid having to translate. Worrying about the exact meaning in your own language of each word and phrase you come to in a foreign language text is really undercutting the point of what you are doing. Your aim ought to be to learn to think in the new language, at least to the extent that you can understand what you are reading without translating it. In order to do this, you have to have worked hard at memorizing standard expressions; you have to have developed a good grasp of the grammar, and you have to be constantly expanding your vocabulary.

Fortunately, most foreign language courses are set up in such a way that you won't be asked to read things that really are too hard for you. What you read at first will often be made up mostly of things you have already heard and learned to say; you should get a nice "Aha!" sense of recognition from those parts of what you are reading. At the very least, reading selections are likely to be on topics you have already been exposed to, so the context and some of the vocabulary will be familiar.

As a result, some of the listening techniques previously discussed can be applied to learning to read as well. You don't have to and shouldn't try to get everything at once. Expect to go over any reading assignment several times. Three quick readings, done systematically, are almost always better than one slow, plodding one. Remember what has been said in Chapter 5 about study techniques for memory work, and about massed and distributed practice, as well.

Even before you start, look to see whether there are questions at the end of the passage. Studying the questions before you read can do a lot to help set the stage, give you a context, and tell you what to read for. Your first pass might then be just to get the gist of the selection. In a difficult assignment, you may want to tackle just one paragraph at a time.

You should make this first pass without looking up any words, even if there are a lot you do not know. Remember, you're just trying to get a general feel for what is under discussion, to get global understanding. Once you have done that, perhaps making notes for yourself of key words to help fix the basic topic in your mind, you're ready to begin a different, more precise kind of reading. But even then you should resist the temptation to check the meaning of each word.

Rule number two for reading in a foreign language is: Learn to make intelligent guesses. If you are going to learn how to read for content and pleasure, just about the most important skill for you to acquire is that of figuring out what a word means from the context in which it is used. You do this all the time in your native language; you read and understand a lot of words you never use in speaking or writing.

To deduce the meanings of words from their contexts—or to remember the meanings of words you have looked up—you will have to read them