

## How to Study Foreign Languages

Most language textbooks give hints at the beginning for easy and effective study. Read these before you begin. Since each language is different, methods good for one may not necessarily be the best for another. There are, however, a few rules, which hold true for most languages.

To begin, you will have to learn the alphabet. The alphabet is different for all areas of the world. While you are learning you will also be practicing the pronunciation of words. Be sure your pronunciation is correct. Proper pronunciation takes a great deal of practice; the new lip and tongue movements are difficult to master, but learning them correctly at the beginning will make later learning much easier. You can help improve your pronunciation by listening to the language (from people, phonograph records, or movies) and pronouncing the words yourself until they sound correct. You might let another person judge your pronunciation. Also practice the sounds by repeating them over and over until you are comfortable making them.

While you are mastering the finer techniques of pronunciation, you will be learning many new words and reading simple sentences. For a while, you will simply have to memorize the words and use them until they come naturally to you. In the case of some languages, such as Spanish, the learning of words will be simplified by the appearance of cognates, or words that are spelled nearly the same as their English equivalents. However, it is a good idea to look these words up the first time you come across them since they may confuse you. For instance, pain in French is “bread”.

Some students have found it useful to keep a stack of vocabulary cards to aid in the learning of words. Take a 3” x 5” card and write the word on one side with its English equivalent on the other.

The conjugation of verbs will probably give you a little more trouble than simple memorization of words. Here you learn to associate the proper verb forms with the proper subjects. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to learning verb conjugations. The best method is plain old-fashioned drill. Repeat your verb conjugations over and over again, in the present, past, future subjunctive, and whatever other forms your instructor gives you, until you are able to pick out automatically the particular verb ending you want to fit the subject of your sentences. For reviewing the verbs, use them in short simple sentences. Repeat the sentence, using all verb forms that make sense. Do more than one sentence.

The patterns of structure (or rules of grammar as they are often called) must be carefully observed at all times. It is one thing to know the meanings of many foreign words, and quite another to be able to put them together correctly to form a meaningful sentence. These rules will be given to you as you go along – the important thing to remember to use them when the occasion arises. Overlearning is very important in learning to speak and write a foreign language. Practice should continue until the patterns are not merely learned, but are virtually automatic.

In the study of a foreign language you will be confronted with idioms (combination of words, which, translated individually, have no meaning, but when placed together, convey a particular idea, i.e., the Spanish “en evs de” which translated word for word, would be “in time of” but taken in combination means “instead of”). Language idioms are among the most difficult hurdles, but it is possible to master them by memorizing them, practicing them over and over, and using them whenever possible.

After you have learned the basic elements of the language, you will begin reading longer selections. There are two approaches to this task:

1. You can read for content, without knowing the specific meanings of all the words.
2. You can translate word-for-word.

Both methods have their merits. A mixture of the two methods is perhaps the best procedure. Read until you come to a passage you do not understand, and then translate it. During the course of your reading, you will often come across single words, which you have not yet learned. Do not look them up as you come to them – read to the end of the paragraph and then go back and look up the words you do not recognize. This method can often cut your work in half, since the meaning of a word may become clear when you read it in context. The words that you need to look up should not be written between lines in the text. Put them on cards with their English equivalents, memorize them and review the passage again at the end of the lesson to see if you recognize them.