

Effective Language Study



Principles of Effective Language Study

ONE: Include Three Components in Your Study Plan

There are many ways to think about the process of language learning. For the purpose of planning personal study time, it can be helpful to think about language learning in terms of three interconnected components.

- **Memory:** Learning and storing many bits of linguistic and cultural information in memory. (see: [Memory Systems](#))
- **Comprehension and Understanding:** Retrieving and combining the bits of information in order to comprehend the language and understand the messages being delivered. (see: [Writing Systems and Sounds](#), [How to Study](#), [Getting Input](#))
- **Communication:** Retrieving and combining the bits of information in order to produce meaningful language and effectively communicate with others. (see: [Conversation Sessions](#), [Strategies for Conversations](#), [Testing and Showing What You Know](#))

To design an effective personal study plan, you will want to give explicit attention to each of these three components. There are a variety of techniques you can use to build skills within each component. Try out the techniques and see which work best for you now and try out new ones as your language skills progress.

TWO: Combine the Three Components and Use Multiple Modes of Expression

As you experiment with these techniques, you will see that many effective language study techniques emphasize one component (memory, comprehension and understanding, or communication), but incorporate activities that also contribute to developing skills in the other components at the same time.

- You will also see that **effective study techniques often combine different modes of comprehension and expression in the same activity**: speaking, listening, reading, writing, and signing and comprehending signs for students of American Sign Language. Visual imagery and physical movement are central to learning a sign language and can also play a role in learning and remembering spoken and written language.
- **Some examples** could be: writing a dialogue, then practicing variations on it out loud; watching a television show then writing a short essay in reaction to it; listening to someone talk and writing down or summarizing what they say; reading an article then telling someone what it was about, using vocabulary you learned from the article.
- By practicing using the language in ways that combine skills and modes of expression, **you are enriching your experience with the words and concepts you are learning**, storing those experiences in memory, and building the memory pathways that will allow you to retrieve and use that information as needed.

In very simplistic terms, all that linguistic and cultural information is stored in many different locations in your brain. **As you encounter, store and retrieve that information in multiple ways, you create and strengthen the links in your brain among all those various bits of information.** This process is literally making physical changes in your brain. The more information you store and the more robust the pathways that allow you to retrieve and use that information in linguistically and culturally appropriate ways, the higher your level of proficiency in the language.

THREE: Practice Communicating!

It is not uncommon for language learners to learn a lot about a language or to comprehend the language, but not be able to communicate in the language. This happens when students store many bits of information, but do not practice using the language for communication:

- To be able to use the language, **you have to put your brain through the process of combining all the information necessary to communicate some meaningful message by speaking or writing in the language.**
- **This means practicing producing language on your own and with other users of the language** as much as possible.
- The more you practice communicating, **the more your language proficiency will improve.**

In this way, learning a language is more like learning to play a musical instrument, dedicated athletic training, or training in theater or dance. **It is not about just doing some grammar exercises and memorizing individual vocabulary words**, rather you need to engage in the activity of communicating over and over again, honing your skills, in order to develop the ability to use the language at a high level of proficiency.

How Long Does it Take?

Students learning languages through the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages (FCCSWL) often ask how long it will take to become fluent in the language.

The answer to this question hinges on:

- **What kind or level of fluency you are trying to reach.**
- Your **prior experience with a language similar to the one being learned.**
- **Individual differences** in language learning motivation and skills.

Fluency and Proficiency

“Fluent” doesn’t always mean the same thing:

- For one student, “fluent” might mean **the ability to comfortably interact with people in the activities of everyday life**, such as informal socializing with friends and family and managing necessities such as shopping and transportation.
- For another student, “fluent” might mean **the ability to take subject area classes conducted in the language, function in an internship or volunteer role without an interpreter, or handle typical complications of everyday life** such as arranging for household repairs, medical care, or navigating bureaucracies.
- For a third student, “fluent” might mean **the ability to engage in high-level professional employment using the language**. This may mean being able to read and write complex texts in the language, give detailed presentations, discuss ideas and give reasoned opinions, and understand and use cultural nuances of expression in complicated discussions and environments.

Since the term “fluency” can have so many meanings, at FCCSWL we have adopted the concept of **“language proficiency”** as defined by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL):

- Language proficiency refers to **what someone can do in the language**.
- **The points of reference are real-life scenarios** that involve increasingly more complex language skills in order to navigate.

In the scenarios above, the first student’s fluency goal corresponds to the **ACTFL INTERMEDIATE** levels of proficiency (there are sub-levels you can learn about later), the second student’s fluency goal corresponds to **ACTFL ADVANCED** levels of proficiency, and the third student’s fluency goals correspond to the **ACTFL SUPERIOR** proficiency rating.*

You can find all of the guidelines for speaking, writing, listening, and reading proficiency [on ACTFL’s website](#). Also see [What are the ACTFL Guidelines?](#)

ACTFL also publishes Can-Do Statements that students can use for self-assessment. For more information, see [Self-Assessment with Can-Do Statements](#) or [access the Can-Do Statements online](#):

Differences in Language Difficulty

How long it takes to learn a language also **depends in part on whether you already know another language that has similarities to the one you are learning**. If your first language is English, it will be less difficult to learn languages such as French or Spanish that have significant vocabulary and grammatical similarities to English, than it will be to learn Vietnamese, Wolof, Arabic, or any other languages that share very little similarity with English.

In the United States, **the government agencies charged with training diplomatic, military, and intelligence personnel have categorized languages based on their level of difficulty for native English speakers to learn**. The difficulty categories are based on actual experience with how many hours of intensive study (in the classroom and outside of class) it typically takes for these government employees to reach various levels of proficiency.

The various government agencies have not always categorized languages in the same way, but you can get a good sense of these categories and estimates of how long it takes by studying [this version of a category chart posted on the website of Language Testing International](#) (the official testing service run by ACTFL).

For reference, students taking courses through FCCSWL are most commonly enrolled in a “half course” each semester.

- **The expectation for a half course is at least one hour of study per day** for the entire semester (this includes both individual study and formal sessions). If you devote one hour per day for a semester, you will have devoted between 90-100 hours to the language learning task.
- **If you are enrolled in a full course, the expectation is two hours per day of study** (individual and formal sessions) which is about 170-200 hours for the semester.

Does It Take Some Students Longer Than Others?

The “How Long Does It Take?” chart also categorizes the length of time it takes to learn a language based on individual aptitude for language learning: Minimal, Average, and Superior. While there is no doubt that some people seem to be able to learn languages more easily than others, what we have learned through many years at FCCSWL is that **there are other factors that play a larger role in whether students will reach their proficiency goal.**

- **Motivation is key.** In the long-run, students who have a strong reason for learning a language will usually make the most progress, whether or not language learning comes easily or with difficulty.
- **Often what might appear to be a difference in “aptitude” is really a difference in whether a student does or does not employ effective study tools and strategies.** A student who learns quickly may not so much have a stronger aptitude for language learning, but has figured out a really good set of language learning techniques and employs them consistently. A student who initially struggles may turn around completely after learning to implement more effective strategies.

*Other rating scales that are based on proficiency include [the ILR \(Interagency Language Roundtable\) Scale](#) used by the U.S. government and [the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages \(CEFR\)](#). Depending on your career goals, you may find it helpful to become familiar with one of these scales.

Tips for Heritage Learners

When you are learning a language that you can speak but not read or write, or which you only speak at home or in certain contexts, **your approach to the learning process will necessarily be different** from that of someone who is coming to a language with no prior knowledge.

The following pointers will help you navigate these differences so you can both make use of your prior experience with a language and also be ready to advance your proficiency to a higher level:

Differences Between Your Dialect and the Formal Language

The language you learn to read and write in your course may be somewhat different from your spoken variety. There may be variations in vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation.

- If you feel that you and your textbook or conversation partner differ in significant ways in terms of vocabulary etc., **it doesn't mean you are wrong**, there is probably just a difference between the standard language and your own dialect. Maybe the form you use is non-standard, or in common use in a place different from where your conversation partner and the book's author are from.
- Feel free to bring such issues up with your conversation partner or mentor. You should note down such differences and study them. Knowing differences is to your advantage.

Be Careful When Speaking

It is important to practice speaking slowly and thinking through the individual words you speak. Since you have been learning and speaking this language for a long time, you may have many habits of speaking (and sometimes errors) that you have internalized by repetition and don't even notice.

- **Be ready to practice to remedy habits of pronunciation that may not be wrong, per se, but are not part of the standard version of the language that you are learning in class.** You can probably speak quickly and intelligibly, but in a classroom setting it is better to slow down and really try to make a habit out of the new things you are learning in your course. (Also see: [Conversation Sessions](#) and [Strategies for Conversations](#))

Read!

Try to read as much as you can (Also see: [Getting Input](#)).

- **One of the best ways to learn how to talk about more abstract or difficult topics in your language is to immerse yourself in texts about them.** These texts will contain specialized vocabulary and sentence structures that you can incorporate into your spoken and written language.
 - **If there is a particular topic you are interested in, find books and news articles about it in your language** and see if you can read and understand them. If you are not sure of the precise meaning of some of the words, note them down and learn them (See: [Flashcards for Vocabulary](#)).
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- You could also note down sentence structures and turns of phrase that you do not use in your own daily speech, and study them as well.

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