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Five College Center for World Languages

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Language Toolbox



There is no magic formula for learning a language, but there are certainly things you can do to learn more effectively and efficiently. Success depends upon making the most of your time on task by choosing learning strategies and study tools that work for you.

If you are taking a course through the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages, you will spend much of your language learning time studying on your own in preparation for intensive one-on-one or small group learning sessions.

This website is about making the most of your individual study time, so that you can make significant progress in your language each week and make the most of all your opportunities to use the language in your formal sessions and beyond.

The same strategies, tools, and techniques can be used to maintain your language skills during winter and summer breaks and to enhance your language learning during study abroad or other language immersion experiences.

These resources are organized into short bits of information so that you can quickly find techniques and tools related to a particular skill and then start to apply them in your language practice time. There are also links to external resources you can use to explore more language learning tools and activities in depth.

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.
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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](#)).
- 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.

Memory Systems

Why You Need a Memory System

To become proficient in a language, **you need to incorporate large amounts of linguistic and cultural knowledge into your memory and you need to be able to use that knowledge to understand and to communicate in the language.** The perennial challenge for language learners is how to best commit this information to memory in ways that will facilitate using the language in real life.

At the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages, we have been working with independent language learners for over twenty-five years. **One of the major differences between successful students and those who struggle is that successful students develop for themselves one or more systems to keep track of the vocabulary and grammatical constructions that they are learning.** Then, they use that system as the starting point for practicing what they are learning and for reviewing and testing themselves repeatedly.

Although some linguistic and cultural information will just sink in on first encounter or through repeated exposure, **most adult learners need to give explicit attention to learning vocabulary and grammar in order to make significant progress.** Children acquire their home language(s) over multiple years through repeated exposure and endless trial and error aided by everyone around them. As an adult language learner, you have the capacity to speed this process along by deliberately choosing effective learning techniques and making those techniques the foundation of your study.

Most of our successful students use flashcard systems, notebook systems, or some combination of the two. Individuals have their own learning styles and have different learning goals. The systems you choose may not be the same as those of other learners, and the systems you use may evolve over time.

There are many different ways flashcards can be used (both the paper kind and new online flashcard apps) and many different ways notebooks or other note-based systems can be used. Go to the other sections under [Memory Systems](#) to read about many different options and see what appeals to you.

As you explore options, keep in mind **some basic principles:**

- **The more powerful systems allow you to organize information for yourself and make your own decisions about how you will incorporate that information into memory.** The process of encountering the information, thinking about how to best remember it and organizing it in your own way is in and of itself a memory building process.
 - Whether you are using flashcards, notebook word lists, or some other technique, **memory is helped by incorporating both word and image-based memory association techniques.** This is especially helpful when you are learning languages for which there are few cognates with English words (or with another language you know well). For suggestions about this, see all the techniques outlined in the other articles in [Memory Systems](#).
 - **Retrieving information from memory in order to use it is facilitated by learning vocabulary and grammar in meaningful contexts.** It is helpful to learn “chunks” of language – sample phrases, expressions, and whole sentences that incorporate vocabulary and grammatical patterns. You can adapt flashcard and notebook techniques to facilitate learning language in chunks and in context.
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- **Your system needs to include points where you practice recalling vocabulary or grammatical patterns and using the information *immediately* to create meaning.** Compose sentences, questions, and answers to questions. Imagine yourself in scenarios where you might use that word or pattern and make up language (spoken or written) that uses it in that context. Do this on your own and then use your conversation sessions and other conversational opportunities to deliberately try to use the vocabulary and patterns when speaking with others (For more information about what to do in your sessions, see the articles under: [Conversation Sessions](#)).
- Regardless of which system you are using, **avoid focusing on translating from the language back into English (or any other language in which you are fluent).** That is translation practice, not practice that will help you recall the information in order to use the language. Although some occasional translation practice is fine (especially if you want to be a translator), if you focus on translating as your main language learning activity, you will not immerse yourself in the thought-world of the language. For the language to become automatic and natural to you, you need to get into that world and not be translating everything back into English in your head.

Why Use Flashcards?

When you learn a language, you have to be ready to learn and commit to memory thousands of items of information during your time learning it. Unless you have photographic memory, **you will need some external way to both keep track of what you have already learned and learn new words and concepts that you encounter over time.**

Flashcards, as mundane and traditional as they may seem, are among the best methods for learning and retaining large amounts of information over time. There are many reasons for this:

- **The process of making a flashcard is, in itself, a way to form a memory.** So when you put a new word on one side and a picture or definition on the other, you are already practicing the association between the two items of information. It's important to make your *own* set for this very reason, instead of borrowing other people's.
- **Flashcards can be reviewed.** So after you have put in the time to make cards for vocabulary or new grammatical structures and have practiced until they are memorized, you can revisit the cards again after a certain amount of time and refresh your memory. This is very important, since everything in learning a language builds on what you already have learned about it.
- **Flashcards help organize study and give you a sense of accomplishment.** While learning something as massive and detailed as a language, it can be hard to keep your study regular and structured and to keep motivation up. When you study flashcards, you just work with one word at a time, and each time you successfully remember a word or construction it will give you a concrete, positive result of what you are able to learn. When repeated almost-daily and done in chunks instead of all at once, flashcards can even be a lot of fun.

[In our list of flashcard resources](#), you will see that most of the electronic flashcard programs are Spaced Repetition Software (SRS). An SRS program makes you rate how well you remember each card whenever you review it on a scale (the lowest score, for example, could be "Don't remember", and the highest score could be "Easy").

It takes this information and brings back a certain number of cards each day for review, showing cards that you had a harder time with sooner and more often, and putting longer amounts of time between the review of cards that were easier for you.

For different ways to use flashcards, refer to:

- The other articles on flashcards in this section.
- Another good resource for using flashcards in language learning is the book [Fluent Forever by Gabriel Wyner](#). You can find resources to help your own languages study and parts of his excellent book on his website.

Of course, flashcards will only help so much without an effective plan for studying. For tips on structuring your language study, see the articles under [How to Study](#).

Resources for Making Flashcards

Although there is nothing wrong with making traditional paper flashcards, there are many online services and programs you can download that both allow you to make flashcards in a more traditional style as well as to use pictures or sounds or otherwise customize your ‘cards’ in many useful ways. What follows is a list of a few flashcard websites or programs you can use, with descriptions of how they work and some of their strengths and weaknesses.

Unless otherwise noted, these are all Spaced Repetitions Software (SRS), which have you rate each card while you work through a deck, based on how easy it is to recall. Using this data, the system brings back cards for review each day. This way you get more time to review cards that are harder in the short term, and in the long term, just as you are starting to forget some of the cards that were easier at first, they will be brought back automatically for review by the program.

- [Anki](#): This program can be downloaded on both your smartphone and your computer. The computer application is free, but the official phone app is quite expensive if you have an iPhone. The phone app is free for Android phones. If you create a user profile in the program, you can sync your data between systems when you use the program. This means whatever system you use it on, you will be able to maintain your learning schedule. Anki allows you to create flashcards with more than just two “front” and “back” fields, and you can also create customized card types for different languages or subjects. Cards can include pictures and audio either copied from the internet or uploaded from your computer. The interface is somewhat outdated and clunky, but with the help of the manual on the Anki website, you can find out quickly how to navigate it.
- [Mnemosyne](#): This program only exists as a computer application; there is no smartphone app. Mnemosyne is free to download. Compared to Anki, you have much less ability to customize the cards you add to your decks, since there are only three pre-programmed card types. You can add pictures and audio as well as text to your cards.
- [Repetitions](#): Repetitions is very similar to Mnemosyne. The interface is slightly different, but it is similarly restricted to only three card types, and the cards can include any pictures or audio that you upload or copy and paste into the program. Unlike Mnemosyne and Anki, however, ~~Repetitions comes with a free phone app for all platforms that automatically syncs with your computer, so you can keep up with your learning schedule even while you are on the move.~~

- [Quizlet](#): Quizlet is a very popular online flashcard service that is free and exists both in an online and phone-app form. It is not an SRS, though, so you have to spend time managing your own review schedule for your flashcards. Also, to add pictures or audio to your cards, you have to take part in the paid membership plan. Otherwise you can only use text and pictures from the set of images provided on Quizlet in your cards.

Flashcards for Vocabulary

Flashcards for Vocabulary

One of the most straightforward applications of flashcards is to learn individual items of vocabulary. For ways to make electronic or online flashcards, see [Resources for Making Flashcards](#). Take a look at the following tips to make your vocabulary flashcards more effective:

- **Define concrete things with pictures.**



On flashcards for objects, people, or anything that is not abstract (e.g., “house,” “cat,” “food,” or “mother”) use a recognizable picture of that thing instead of a definition in English. **This helps you learn to think in the language, instead of just translating from English. Pictures are also easier to remember than words.**

To find an appropriate image, google the word in the target language and find a good picture to copy and paste into an electronic flashcard.

- **Define abstract words using words that you already know.**

While the most difficult or culturally specific abstract words may require English definitions, to define most abstract words (e.g., words like “freedom” or “importance” that don’t refer to a particular physical thing) it is best to use a definition in the target language. Essentially, try to explain it in simpler terms like a native speaker would.

Create your definition and look up any other words that you don’t know to complete it, adding those words to your memory system as you go. Then put the definition on one side of a flashcard, with the

abstract vocabulary word on the other.

- **For grammatical words**, words like prepositions and conjunctions that serve to join other meaningful words, see [Flashcards for Grammar](#).
 - **NOTE: The front and back of your flashcards should each contain only one or two items of information.** If you put too many things, it makes them harder to remember. **If you want to remember a word in more than one way (e.g. using both a cloze card with an example sentence and also definitions in the target language), make one flashcard for each strategy that you have chosen.**
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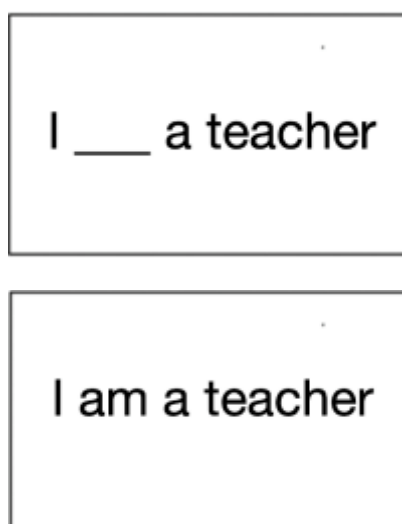
Flashcards for Grammar

Flashcards for Grammar

Flashcards ([Why Use Flashcards?](#)) are certainly excellent tools for learning vocabulary, but they can be applied to other parts of a language as well. One of the toughest things to get a hold on can be the grammar, or the abstract words and methods of joining together the nouns and verbs to make meaningful units. Instead of memorizing grammar charts and lists of abstract words, try the following method to learn and retain new grammar that you encounter:

Gapped Sentence Cards

- **Use gapped examples of sentences** that contain a particular grammatical word or construction to make new flashcards. These are also called 'cloze' cards.
- For example:

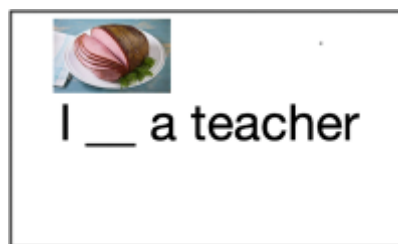


You are learning English and want to remember that you say “I am...”, not “I is/are...”. So the front of your card would be something like “I ___ a teacher”, and the back would be “I **am** a teacher”.

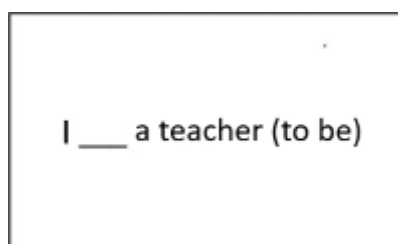
- This way, you can **practice real sentences you encounter** and **learn the grammar in context**, instead of memorizing charts or isolated forms of words.

Supplementary Methods

- You can also **combine this method with pictures or other hints**:



- You could also put “to be” in parentheses so you recall the verb, but still have to remember the specific form. The front of the card would look like “I ___ a teacher (to be)”. **The more associations you can make with a word, the easier it will be to remember.**



Mnemonic Devices

Mnemonic devices are **systems that can help you improve your capacity of remembering things**. They are memory techniques to help your brain retain and quickly recall important information. These methods often involve associating what you want to remember with an image, a word or a sentence. Mnemonic devices have been used since the time of Ancient Greece and beyond and can be useful for learning difficult words and phrases in a foreign language.

- One of the most common techniques is known as **memory palace or method of loci**. In this technique, the items to be remembered are associated with a mental picture of a known physical location, such as your home or your place of work. Within that space, you create a trajectory and put in images that represent the elements that need to be memorized in the middle.
- **Creating interesting (and sometimes bizarre) associations helps you remember the elements better.** For example, if you need to know that the German word *raupe* means caterpillar, you could have a caterpillar with a rope around its body.

Articles about Mnemonics on the Web

- Wikipedia has [a very well-sourced, detailed article](#) on different kinds of mnemonics.
 - The website Fluent in Three Months has a good free article that gives you a [Step-by-Step Guide to Making a Memory Palace](#), and other free resources.
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Notebook Systems

One way to record and remember information is to make use of notebooks. A notebook system is an effective way to keep track of all the things you learn over a period of time, and it can form a sort of external memory for you. Writing and organizing what you learn will also help you remember what you learn in class.

You can also combine this method with flashcards and mnemonic devices (See: [Why Use Flashcards?](#) and [Mnemonic Devices](#)) for more targeted memorization. But you can't just write things down at random if you want to learn effectively, so **you need to organize your notebook for language study**. Try the following tips to make effective use of your notebook:

- **Divide your notebook into sections**, such as vocabulary, grammar, sounds, and (if your language has a different script) letters/symbols. You might think of more categories, which is fine. Having an organized system is what is important.
- **When you encounter new words, add them to the appropriate section**, with the word on one side and the definition and other relevant grammatical information on the other side. You might want to add examples of the word being used from your textbook too.
- **When you find new grammar, don't organize it into a chart, instead pull examples of the grammar from your book or conversation sessions** in use so you can see and recall *how* it is used. You can also use these examples to make flashcards: [Flashcards for Grammar](#).
- **With sounds and letters/symbols, write them down with an example of their being used**. You can also draw pictures or hints that help you recall the sound.
- You will be constantly adding new information to your notebook from class and your book. **Set time aside each week to review a portion of the older material** before intensively studying the newer material. At the end of a semester you will be able to look back at everything you have done in the notebook and do a comprehensive review.

Writing Systems and Sounds



Introducing Yourself to a Script

If your language has a non-Roman script (i.e. different from the one we use in English), then you will want to begin associating the individual sounds you have learned with the new letters or symbols that represent them. By following the process outlined below, you can start making this association both visually and aurally. This process is also useful for learning characters that are based in the Roman script, but differ in pronunciation and/or appearance from the version of the script you are used to.

(NOTE: **It is best to follow this process with just a few letters or symbols at a time**, as your book introduces them, so you can focus on learning just a few letters very well, instead of having to handle many new letters or symbols all at once.)

Acquaint Yourself with the Forms of the Letters

- Find a list of all the letters or symbols you want to start learning in your textbook. Write them down in a notebook. **Write them a few times to get used to the shape of the letters.** Your book will have instructions on how to write them by hand, so you should follow those recommendations instead of just improvising to create the printed shapes you see.
- **The handwritten form of a script is often somewhat different from the printed one**, and the instructions on writing the letters in your book will probably be based on the easier-to-write, handwritten form.
- **Now write the sounds that these letters or symbols represent next to them, using the Roman script used in English.** This information will be available in the parts of your textbook that introduce the script to you. If you are learning symbols that represent whole syllables or words, write the full syllable or word they represent in Roman script.

Familiarize Yourself with the Sounds of the Letters

- **Now listen to a recording of the pronunciation of the language's sounds several times, and as you hear each sound, put a checkmark by the letter that represents it.** Listen until you have heard the sounds of all the letters you are trying to learn. If you need to, pause the recording or repeat parts of it. **It never hurts to listen again** and make sure you are making the correct connection between sounds and letters.
- **If your language uses single symbols to write entire syllables or words**, then put a checkmark by the symbol(s) that *contain* the individual sounds you hear, and do this until you have identified all the sounds expressed by the symbols.
- Now, take out a totally blank piece of paper and listen to the recording of sounds again. **When you hear a sound from the recording which you are learning the letter for, pause and write down the letter associated with it.** Do this until you can write down the letters you are working with fairly quickly when you hear the sounds. Take time to pause the recording and repeat individual sounds as necessary. Look at your book as only the last resort when you absolutely can't remember the shape of a letter you are working on.
- **If you are working with symbols representing syllables or whole words**, instead of starting with a blank page, write down the specific symbols you are working on, but without a Roman transcription. When you hear sounds in the recording, write them in Roman transcription next to the symbols that they belong to. Do this until you have identified all the sounds in the

symbols you are working with in the correct order.

- **NOTE: Some languages may have multiple letters or symbols that make the same sound, or different sounds expressed by a single letter or symbol** depending on certain rules in the writing system, so do not be surprised if there is not always a one-to-one correspondence.

EXPLORE FURTHER: Go online to YouTube, search for videos about the alphabet for your language (for example, search “Bangla Alphabet” or “Malay Alphabet”). For almost any language, numerous videos will come up. Beware that they will vary in quality and perhaps in accuracy. Avoid videos that are clearly done by new learners of the language showing off what they have learned.

Look for videos by native speakers or highly skilled speakers. These may well display regional or dialectal differences. Take your textbook as your standard, but it is also good to become aware of regional differences.

EXPLORE FURTHER: Many scripts have an associated “alphabet song”. Ask your conversation partner if such a song exists. You can also search on Google or YouTube to see if you can find one. **Learning a song to remember the letters and their names can be easier than just learning them in their dictionary order by rote.** You will want to learn them in order at some point, since knowing the order of letters is necessary to look up words in dictionaries.

Introducing Yourself to Sounds

In the beginning of the course, you should listen to audio recordings of the sounds of the language you are learning. There should be a section on sounds at the beginning of the audio that goes with your textbook.

When you listen to these sounds, you should do a few exercises to really familiarize yourself with them:

Associating the Sounds with their Transcriptions

- **First, just listen to the individual sounds being recited a couple of times** to get familiar with them.
- After the first couple of times of just listening, look at the way they are written in your textbook. Your textbook may show both the letter as it is written in the language and an English transcription of the sound of the letter.
- **NOTE: If the letters are similar to English letters or in an alphabet that is easy to learn quickly,** you may not make extensive use of the transcriptions for the sounds. **If the language you are learning has a complex script,** your textbook may use English transcription along with the actual letters during the early part of your course.
- As you listen to the audio and look at how it is written in your textbook, **note whether your audio is giving you just the sound of the letter** (for example, the sound of the letter “b” in English), **the name of the letter** (such as how you say the name of the letter “b” in English),

or a combination of both sound and name (which may be the same in some languages).

- **Now listen to the recording of the sounds (or letter names) while looking at the letters as they are written.** If you feel ready, try pronouncing some of the sounds as you go along. You can pause the recording to give yourself time to try each letter. You will come back to pronunciation practice later, right now just try it once or twice. See which sounds seem easy to you and which are challenging.
- Depending upon the language, your initial audio samples may also have examples of tones. Listen to those examples and see if you can produce them.

A NOTE OF ENCOURAGEMENT: You may find some sounds simply impossible to distinguish by listening practice at first. **This is perfectly natural.** It takes time to completely acquire an ear for distinctions between another language's sounds, especially sounds that do not exist in your native language. So don't despair, just keep practicing. Over time the more difficult sounds will come to you.

EXPLORE FURTHER: **Jump ahead in your textbook audio to a section that has dialogue or whole sentences. Listen to get a sense of how the language sounds when spoken.** Listen to the intonation of the speakers, the speed, pauses in sound or breaks between words or sentences, and see if you can recognize any individual sounds based on your initial encounter with the sound system. Don't worry if you cannot pick out many individual sounds with certainty. That will come in time.

Starting to Pronounce the Sounds

After you have gotten used to hearing the sounds of your language, you should start practicing them yourself:

- **Go through the list of sounds now and try to pronounce them individually along with the recording.** Do this a few times, and note which ones are more difficult for you to reproduce. Take the time to pronounce them individually, pausing the recording if you need to. Go back through the recording a few times just to pronounce those sounds that you found difficult.
- **Now try to go through the list one time without the recording.** If you can't remember some sounds, listen to them again, then go through the list until you at least approximate most of the sounds.

Now it's time to start putting sounds together and seeing how they work within words. It is best to do the following activities with just a few sounds at a time then go back and do a few more, so you do not get bogged down practicing too many of them at once.

- Write down a list of the sounds you are learning in a notebook, or type them in a computer. **Now look at the dialogues or vocabulary in your textbook's first chapter, and try to find one word for each sound that contains that it.** Write it down or type it next to the sound that it contains. You should have audio recordings of the vocabulary and dialogues for the first chapter in your book. Listen to the recordings, paying attention to each sound in context when you hear each word you have selected.
- **Now listen to the words again and try to say them along with the recordings.** Do this only a few times with the ones that are easier for you to say, and spend more time trying to repeat the words that are more difficult for you. It is good to pause and repeat as many times as

you need.

- **When you say the words, enunciate the sounds slowly and very clearly.** Try to exaggerate the sounds and distinctions that are new to you. It can seem a bit silly to enunciate so dramatically, but it is very important to train your mouth to make the right motions and shapes at this early stage of learning.

Using a Place of Articulation Chart to Practice Sounds

If you are still unsure how to produce some of the sounds or having a difficult time at this point, you can print out and make use of the diagram linked to below in your conversation sessions to help determine how you should be making the sounds:

- [Place of Articulation Chart](#) ^[1]
- When discussing a specific sound, have your conversation partner identify the number(s) on this diagram that correspond to the places where the sound is articulated so you can try to imitate them. (For example, to describe the sound of “t” in “Tom”, you could say that positions 16 or 17 on the tongue touch against 4 or 5 right behind the front teeth).
- NOTE: Your conversation partner may not have thought about the sounds of their language in this way before, so it may take them some time and thought to pin down exactly what they do when they make the sounds, but nevertheless with the chart they should be able to help you with most sounds.

NOTE OF ENCOURAGEMENT: **As with listening, you may find that it is almost impossible for you to accurately produce some more difficult sounds when you start out.** The activities listed above can help you approximate them more closely, but what will really make you proficient with pronouncing the sounds will simply be time spent studying, speaking, and being exposed to the language. Just *do your best* from the start to produce the sounds correctly, and with time and effort you will find that they will get easier for you.

[1] Created by User:ish shwar (original .png deleted), .svg by Rohieb [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>), CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>) or CC BY-SA 2.5 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5>)], via Wikimedia Commons from Wikimedia Commons

Flashcards for Learning Single Letters

These activities, making use of flashcards ([Why Use Flashcards?](#)) will help you establish and remember the connection between the individual sounds and letters. **After the first time you work through the cards successfully, you should go back periodically to review them.** First review every few days, then every week or two. Even if you forget some of them each time, the act of remembering will strengthen your ability to recall them.

If you are using a Spaced Repetition System (SRS) flashcard program (for more on SRS, see: [Resources for Making Flashcards](#)), it will take care of the scheduling for you.

Activity 1: Assembling Sounds and Symbols

- First create a flashcard for each new letter or symbol you encounter.
- On the front write the letter (this is an excellent opportunity to find out and practice how to type individual letters in the script you are learning, if you use online flashcards).
- On the back, write the transcription in Roman script.
- Practice the flashcards until you can look at the letter and pronounce it without having to flip it over to look at the transcription. When you look at each letter or symbol, pronounce it out loud, not just in your head.
- Once you can do that, flip the cards around. Practice the cards until you can identify letters by their transcribed pronunciation. Pronounce the transcription out loud and only then guess the letter, trying to visualize it in your mind. If you can't recall the way it looks, keep reviewing the card until you can. If there are multiple letters that make the same sound, when you look at the Roman script you should try to think of every letter that

Activity 2: Creating Stories for Sounds

- This flashcard activity will require just a bit of creativity. First write the letter you want to learn on the front of a flashcard, like in the last activity.
- On the backside, put a picture of something that the sound of the letter reminds you of, or a familiar word or name from English but with a letter replaced by the new one you are learning. The more personal and interesting the association is, the better! For example: A letter with a "k" sound, like क in the language Hindi, could be substituted for the "c" in "cat" that has the same sound, so the back of the card could have "My कat, Billy". A letter with an "s" sound could have a picture of a snake on the back, to remind you of the similar hissing sound a snake makes.
- Practice remembering this association by looking at the letter on the front and trying to recall what you associate it with. Then reverse the cards once you can do this for all the letters or symbols you are working on, and try to remember the letter from the association on the back. As in the last activity, when you see the association you should try to visualize the letter.

Flashcards for Learning Single Letters - Video

Flashcards for Learning Combinations of Letters

Once you can associate a new set of letters or symbols with the sounds of your language ([Flashcards for Learning Single Letters](#)), you will want to come to grips with how to put the letters together into larger units such as words. These activities will help you get used to seeing letters and symbols and pronouncing them in context.

Do these activities **with a few letters at a time to focus your work** instead of getting bogged

down working through too many letters at once. After the first time you work through the cards successfully, you should go back periodically to review them. First review every few days, then every week or two. **Even if you forget some of the cards each time, the act of remembering each time will strengthen your ability to recall them later.**

If you are using a Spaced Repetition Software (SRS) flashcard program ([Resources for Making Flashcards](#)), it will take care of the scheduling for you.

Activity 1: *Filling in the Gaps*

- Find a different word in the first chapter of your book's vocabulary or dialogues for each letter or symbol from the script. It should be a short word and contain that letter or symbol.
- Write the word on the front of a new flashcard with an obvious gap where the letter or symbol should be (i.e. if I were trying to learn the English letter "c" from the word "cat", I would write something like "_at" on the front).
- On the back of the flashcard write the full word and its definition. If the word is a concrete item like an animal or object, just draw a picture of what it means (or paste in a picture, if you're using electronic flashcards). You should use word-based definitions for more abstract things that cannot be pictured, as noted in [Flashcards for Vocabulary](#).
- If your language has different letter forms for the beginning, end, or middle of a word, find words that contain those forms and make flashcards out of them too, with a gap in the word where the symbol or letter would be.
- When you practice the flashcards, write down your guess of what the word would be if you filled in the blank, or at least visualize it in your mind. Say out loud what you have written or visualized, then check the back of the card. Do this until you can get all of the cards in the set right.

Activity 2: *Distinguishing Similar Sounds with Minimal Pairs*

- This is a useful exercise if you are having trouble distinguishing between two sounds. Find a word that *doesn't* contain the particular symbol or letter that you want to practice, but one that you find very similar or that you have a hard time distinguishing from the one you are practicing.
 - Write the word and say it out loud, pronouncing it carefully.
 - Now replace the similar-sounding character with the symbol or letter you want to learn to distinguish from it. Write this new word down.
 - Say the new "word" you have made out loud, then the original one. Try to pronounce them very clearly and to see if you can tell the difference in pronunciation. Focus on the differences that you make in pronouncing them, even if you have a hard time hearing those differences. You could use a recording app, such as voice memos on a phone, to record yourself saying the pair of words and see if you can hear the difference.
 - If you are still having trouble distinguishing two sounds, **bring the pair of words you made to your conversation partner** and have them pronounce them for you and explain the difference. It can take a while to hear distinctions that are not made in your native language, but it is still important that you learn to make them yourself.
-

Using the IPA to Learn Sounds

The IPA is an alphabet developed by linguists to precisely represent the sounds in all human languages. [Look it up on Wikipedia](#), and go to the sections on consonants and vowels. You will see a huge number of symbols, laid out in a grid-like chart for the consonants and a beaker-shaped chart for the vowels.

- **The words on the left-hand side of the consonant chart refer to *how* the sounds are produced, and those on the top of the chart refer to *where in your mouth* they are produced.** So the symbol “θ”, the sound spelled “th” in the English word “thing”, is a dental (pronounced with the tongue against the back of the teeth) fricative (the air flow is not stopped when you make the sound, but is constricted).
- **The vowel chart is actually a very abstract diagram of your mouth.** The vowels at the top-left, like “i” (pronounced like the vowel sound spelled “ea” in “meat”), are pronounced with the tongue bunched up high in the front of your mouth. Pronounce the words “meat” or “me”, which both contain this vowel, and you be able to notice this.

Using Wikipedia to Understand the IPA

The terminology associated with the IPA can seem intimidating, almost like learning another language on top of the one you are already working on, but **you can easily understand the distinct ways in which your language’s sounds are pronounced by going to the language’s Wikipedia article.**

In the article, instead of the overwhelming full IPA chart, you can find just the set of IPA symbols that describe the sounds in your language. You also don’t need to memorize the names for the IPA symbols, since Wikipedia has descriptions of them and recordings of them being pronounced. To find your language’s sounds written in IPA:

- Go to the language’s page on Wikipedia.
- Go the section titled “Phonology”.
- There will be a table that lays out the sounds of the language in an organized chart in the form of IPA symbols. You can click on any of the individual sounds and go to a page which is a description of how they are made in the mouth. The pages for each individual sound also include audio recordings.
- **NOTE: If the individual symbols aren’t linked to their Wikipedia pages, you can copy and paste them into the Wikipedia search bar and find them.** Every IPA symbol has its own Wikipedia page.
- **NOTE: The IPA symbols may not correspond exactly with the standard Roman letters used to represent your language’s sounds.** Thankfully, the Wikipedia page will usually also have a link to a page that describe how the sounds in the chart match up with the script, or a section of the main article that does the same.

Using IPA with Non-Roman Scripts

~~You may be learning a language with a different script from the one we use in English.~~

Thankfully, the articles for those scripts will show the IPA symbols that correspond to the individual

letters. To find the sounds associated with your language's **script in IPA**:

- Go to the Wikipedia page of the script associated with your language.
- You will find somewhere on the page a table, or sentence-long descriptions of the sounds of the letters with IPA symbols. As with the phonetic chart above, you can click on the symbols and they will take you to pages describing how to make the sound with your mouth and containing audio samples.

EXPLORE FURTHER: Gabriel Wyner has fantastic videos about IPA on his website [Fluent Forever](https://fluent-forever.com/). You can see the multiple videos he made at the following link: <https://fluent-forever.com/chapter3/>. He works through the different IPA charts for vowels and consonants, describes the way the sounds are made, and pronounces most of the sounds on the chart as examples. You might find this especially helpful if you are more of a visual or aural learner.

Using Non-English Keyboards

If your language has a script other than the Roman script used for English, you may want to learn to type in it. Or your language may use a Roman script, but contains accents or other marks that are not used in English.

Early in the learning process, writing by hand will be enough as you get used to the letter forms, but once you feel comfortable with identifying characters and the way the script works, **learning to type will allow you to write much more quickly and to use the script online or in other computer-based applications.**

Finding and Activating a New Keyboard

The following points show you **how to find and activate scripts on your computer**:

- **For Windows 10 users**, refer to [this online guide](#).
- **For Windows 8 users**, refer to [the guide posted by Microsoft on their website](#).
- **For Windows 7 users**, refer to [the guide posted by Microsoft on their website](#).
- **For Macintosh users**, refer to [the guide posted by Apple on their website](#).

Discover Your Keyboard Layout

Now it's time to **discover the layout of your keyboard**:

- **To find the layout of your keyboard**, do a [Google Images search](#) for "(your language's name/name of the script) keyboard layout". Test out typing a few letters to find a picture of the layout that matches with the one you have. (Some scripts have more than one keyboard layout so this is an important step.)
 - Now print this out and put it somewhere where you can see it easily while you practice typing. You will use this until you can remember the letters without looking.
-

Practice Using the Keyboard

Now you need to **start practicing**:

- **Start a new text document on your computer** (you should probably use your computer's native program, since it will work better with the built-in keyboards). Go through the vocabulary of any chapter from your textbook, and type out every word. Type each word at least two or three times, since the first time you will probably be focused on figuring out exactly how to type it. The second and third times will be easier and reinforce your motor memory.
- **Repeat this exercise with different vocabularies from different chapters every few days or so**, until you start being able to type without looking at the keyboard layout sheet that you printed out.
- **Now find entire sentences** in a chapter of your book. Pick a manageable number like ten or twelve. Now type the entire sentences, several times each. Like in the exercise with typing single words, repetition will help your motor memory. Keep doing this exercise every few days or when convenient, until you are able to type more fluidly. You can also alternate this with practicing typing single words.

After doing enough of this kind of practice, you will have learned the basics of typing in your language. **All that remains is to keep typing to increase your speed and muscle memory by typing more and more.** Typing short essays or homework assignments or finding online forums to type in the language will help with this.

NOTE: **Scripts like the Chinese script, which is not alphabetic, usually have different input methods than just having a single letter for each key, since there are thousands of possible characters.** If the script you are learning is of this type (i.e. any script with more than a few dozen characters), you will need to do some research. Use online searches like "Chinese keyboard Windows" to find articles which detail exactly how to use the keyboard. Then, once you are familiar with the input method, you can go ahead and do the typing exercises above.

How to Study



How to Study: Introduction

The materials for each new week should be prepared prior to the conversation session for that week. Students should go to the first conversation session with Week 1 material already prepared. Work your way through the weekly assignment concentrating on vocabulary memorization, structural accuracy, and practice, practice, practice!

In order to succeed with this independent format, you will need to take quite a bit of creative initiative in terms of designing your own practice sessions:

- Talk to your coat rack.
- Speak in your head to everyone you meet as you cross campus.
- Make up imaginary conversations with the squirrels on the steps of the dining hall.

You can never have too much practice! Once you think you have mastered a concept – let's say "greetings" – push yourself to the next level:

- You can greet Jim and you can greet Maria.
- Can you greet Jim and Maria simultaneously? And what if they don't hear you?
- What if you thought it was Maria but it turns out to be Susan?

Continue to practice, pushing yourself to more and more difficult levels of conversing by introducing complications to the situation.

The first step is memorizing the vocabulary and structures, but that's only the beginning. Armed with that information, you have to imagine every possible situation that could include the week's vocabulary:

- Can you handle x or y or z?
- What would x say to you in y situation, and how would you respond?

After you have thought about what situations could occur, work out the scenario out loud, and keep refining it until you can run through it flawlessly out loud. Then move on to a new scenario.

This section includes more important tips like these. Remember that the more time you practice, the better you will get!

Learning Professional Language Skills

Developing Professional Language Skills

You are probably excited to get to use your target language to advance your interests and career. But using a language in a professional context is a wholly different challenge from using it in the classroom, and requires training and preparation that can't be found in school. In fact, the only way to become very proficient in this way of speaking is to be in an actual professional space and model yourself on the language being used around you.

Still, that doesn't mean that you can't prepare before you have such an opportunity. We'll go over the importance of interning abroad and some resources, and also how to prepare before you go to work in a space where your target language is used.

Interning Abroad

If you are able to study abroad during your college career, or you are looking for work opportunities after graduation, consider an internship or job in the country or countries where your target language is spoken. ~~There are a variety of scholarships and grants put out by institutions that could fund your~~ travel and time abroad, such as the Fulbright program. You can find the study abroad programs that

your campus offers at the appropriate link:

- [Amherst College: Office of Global Education](#)
- [Mt. Holyoke: McCulloch Center for Global Initiatives](#)
- [Smith College: Study Abroad](#)
- [University of Massachusetts Amherst: International Programs Office](#)
- [Hampshire College: Global Education Office](#)

Preparing for a Professional Environment

Even if you won't be able to perfect these skills outside of a professional environment, there are ways you can develop them without going abroad or in preparation for the opportunities you find there. In fact, doing this preparation will make it a lot easier when you are in an actual workplace or job interview situation. Let's cover a few important components of the professional experience to prepare yourself for.

1. How to Describe Your Work in your Target Language

First you need to arm yourself with appropriate vocabulary. In your courses, you may have focused on learning the language in general. Learning to speak like a professional means mastering the specialized language of your chosen field.

You will need to know how to utilize online and media resources for learning (see the other articles under How to Study). You can start with a simple google search in your target language for the job you want. What kind of things come up? Are there any relevant articles or any media like movies and shows? Read about what people say about the work in the target language, recording and learning the vocabulary with your memory system ([Why You Need a Memory System](#)) as you go.

Any native speakers you know, such as friends, iTalki conversation partners, or teachers can help you find resources or tell you about the job and what sort of vocabulary might be useful. Someone who actually holds the job or a related one would be ideal, but may be hard to find. Also watch some of the media sources you find, and read any news articles that seem relevant (most search engines have a 'news' tab).

Once you've sat down for a few sessions and done this research, you should be getting familiar with the terminology used to describe your work. Now it's time for you to practice what you've learned.

Write a few short essays describing the work. Some topics could be: the typical day of someone who does this job, the different roles in the workplace and how people interact, and what roles you would find suitable or not suitable to your skills and interests. You want to get in the mindset of what it will be like to use your target language on the job.

If possible, after doing the written exercise, describe topics like these orally to an iTalki conversation partner or other native speaker you have access to. Have them ask you questions about the job and what the various duties are there. Don't worry, even if it's not convenient to talk to an actual person, you can at least practice speaking out loud. Any spoken practice will be good practice to prepare you to speak in that professional environment. You can come up with your own questions and try to answer them as best you can in your target language.

Once you've done this, you should have a basis to build on with real world language experience.

2. Preparing to Interview

Now create a resume for yourself in your target language, like you would in English. List the jobs and internships you have done in order, listing the things you did and any special achievements in those roles. Also list where you studied, what you studied, and any special activities you took part in or awards you received. Be as comprehensive as you can. Collect any new vocab you have to look up for this and store it in your memory system.

Look at ads for the sort of opportunities you're seeking. What skills are they looking for? Note down the requirements and preferences, and put your skills and qualifications you wrote in your target language under each one to try to make them fit.

To prepare for an interview, you should lay out for yourself the process of getting a job or internship. Research the components of the hiring process in that country and the sort of etiquette in dress and manners that is expected. If you're having trouble finding this information, contact one of your old or current teachers to ask, or someone else familiar with the country. Based on all of this information, create a basic job interview script to practice with, on your own or with a native speaker if available.

The questions should be things like:

- What are your qualifications for this position?
- Why are you interested in this position?
- What did x or y previous experience/job from your resume teach you that is relevant to this position?
- What would you consider your strengths and weaknesses?

Answer the questions in your target language. The first time, it might be hard, but keep at it. By repetition, you will find that it gets easier to talk about yourself and your achievements. Review any grammar you need to do this, if you're a bit rusty. You'll want to rehearse a few times, then take a break for a day or two and try again. Change the questions once you get used to the original set you were being asked or asking yourself, and keep doing it until talking about yourself and your achievements and relating them to your desired job becomes second nature.

Conclusion

We've gone over a couple of important ways you can prepare yourself for professional opportunities in your target language. With the skills you learn from online sources, available native speakers, and practicing giving interviews and talking about the job, you should be able to pursue jobs and internships with much more assurance in your proficiency in these topics. You will then be able to perfect your professional proficiency in your field of choice with hands-on experience.

Preparing for Studying

Before you make a plan to study, think about how much study time is expected of you. Find your syllabus and take a look at how much study time is expected of students during the week. When you know what is expected of you, it will be easier to come up with your study plan.

Planning When to Study

Next, make a plan for the timing of your study sessions. You definitely have other classes, meetings, practices, and rehearsals that you will need to work around, so think about:

- What are the chunks of time you know you have free that you could use for language study?
- **You will get the most out of a consistent study time, so once you decide on a schedule, block out those times and do not schedule any classes or meetings that conflict with them.** There will inevitably be weeks when you have to reschedule, but you have the best chance of achieving an uninterrupted study hour if you treat it like your other academic obligations.
- **If you are available at multiple times of day, think about when your brain works best.** In the morning, afternoon or evening? Before or after you eat?

Planning Study Space

During your study sessions, you will need to read, write, and speak aloud. It is essential that you study somewhere you can comfortably speak without distracting others or being distracted:

- If you usually study in a shared space with friends or roommates, **consider relocating for language study** so that you have the space to speak freely.
- If you like to have other study tools available, such as a whiteboard or a desktop computer, **plan accordingly.**
- **Find out if you can reserve a classroom or a room in the library.**

Study Materials

For your study sessions, **think of what you will need beyond pen, paper, and your textbook:**

- Will you need a box of index cards to store your flashcards?
- Do you need highlighters and small sticky notes/tabs to help you find information in your book?

Consider how you will do listening activities: Your listening materials are an essential component of your studying.

- Are the audio files for your book on a CD or online? If your computer doesn't have a CD drive, you might want to invest in an external CD drive or use a different computer when you do listening exercises.
- Depending on the format of your CD, you could also try moving the files onto your computer.

If you use flashcards, take notes, or use other materials online or on your phone, **make a plan to keep your devices distraction-free while studying:**

- Turn off notifications on your phone. On your laptop, use a program that temporarily blocks access to websites that take your focus away from your work.
 - **Make sure that the time, place, and materials for studying work well together.** If you plan to study in a location besides your room, you might need to bring your textbook, notebook, maybe your laptop, and anything else you need with you to other classes and commitments.
 - You will need to make sure the location you plan to study in is free of distraction during the time of your studying. This is particularly important if you live with other people or if you want to study in a shared space.
-

Make a Plan

Before your study time, it's important to **make a plan of how exactly you will use your time**. Making a plan beforehand has many benefits:

- **It helps you remember** everything you need to do.
- **It reminds you of the different ways you need to interact with the language.**
- **It helps you avoid wasting time** by sitting at your desk thinking "What should I do next?"

Your study plan should include at least some of the following: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The skills you emphasize will depend on what is in your syllabus or study guide for that week, and the format of your course. For example, if your course includes a weekly written homework assignment, you will need to spend some of your study time writing out exercises and completing the written homework.

If your course is speaking-based and doesn't have written assignments, you will spend much less time on writing and more time on other skills.

How should you allocate your time?

You do not have to do the exact same activities for every study session. Create a list of potential activities that you can do to practice a particular skill (for help planning your study, refer to the articles under: [How to Study](#)). Select a variety of activities to do during the week so that you're covering everything present in the assigned material.

That said, it's beneficial to repeat some activities more than others.

- **You should be speaking as much as possible throughout the week.** Speaking and listening are the main skills you will use during your conversation sessions, and the skills you will rely on most in the target language country.
- You can also cycle through reading practice, writing practice, flashcards, and other activities depending on your needs.

Some examples of one-hour study session plans are below:

Example 1 (Beginner)

- Reading textbook chapter, taking notes, making new flashcards **(15 minutes)**
- Repeatedly listening to audio dialogues and examples from book, repeating them aloud **(15 minutes)**
- Speaking aloud: using new vocabulary words in a sentence **(15 minutes)**
- Reviewing flashcards of new and old vocabulary **(10 minutes)**
- Writing: writing multiple short sentences using material learned, practicing the script (if applicable) **(5 minutes)**

[Sample Study Plan for Beginners](#)

Example 2 (Intermediate)

- Reading textbook chapter, taking notes, making new flashcards **(15 minutes)**
- Writing: writing a short paragraph, writing out exercises from book **(10 minutes)**
- Speaking: reading written paragraph out loud, adding sentences to it orally **(20 minutes)**
- Listening to a radio or watching a TV show without subtitles, taking notes as you watch **(15 minutes)**

[Sample Study Plan for Intermediate](#)

Make a Plan - Video

Useful Study Techniques

Suggestions are in approximate order from easier to more challenging.

Vocabulary

- Flashcards [Memory Systems](#)
- Create sentences on your own: When you learn new vocabulary, make up a sentence for each of your new words.
- Keep track of new vocabulary in a notebook: [Notebook Systems](#)

Grammar

- Use flashcards to learn grammar: [Flashcards for Grammar](#)
- Write out sentences that contain the new grammatical concept you are learning.
- Read sentences aloud that contain the grammar you want to learn. After reading out loud, close the book for a few minutes and create several new sentences to say to yourself.

Conversational Fluency

- See our [Strategies for Conversations](#)
- Create sentences on your own: When you learn new vocabulary, make up a sentence for each of your new words.
- Act out a dialogue from your book. Prepare for a role play by acting out both parts.
- Pick a person, event, or topic and describe it out loud, without writing anything down.
- Improvise a role play or dialogue without using your book.
- While watching a TV show, choose a character to follow closely. Pause the show after they speak and reply to what they say, or comment on their actions.

Pronunciation

- [Using the IPA to Learn Sounds](#)
 - [Introducing Yourself to Sounds](#)
 - Listen carefully to the audio in your book and repeat the dialogues and exercises out loud.
 - Record yourself on your phone or on a computer program saying something out loud (a word, a sentence, a dialogue). Compare your pronunciation to a recording of a native speaker.
-

- Use Forvo.com for recordings of words that aren't in your textbook audio. Forvo.com has native speaker recordings of many words in various languages. (Not all languages offered at FCCSWL are available.)
- Backchaining is a pronunciation technique that involves sounding out each syllable of a word, starting with the last syllable. [This article](#) from Fluent Forever is a helpful guide.

Listening Comprehension

- See the articles under [Getting Input](#).
- Listen to your textbook audio.
- Make listening flashcards with digital flashcard apps, such as Anki. See [Resources for Making Flashcards](#).
- Watch a TV series in the target language. Watch first without, then with subtitles. If possible, try to find a version with subtitles in the language first, then use English subtitles.
- Listen to the radio in your target language.

Reading and Writing

- [What is Extensive Reading?](#)
- [Introducing Yourself to a Script](#)
- [Flashcards for Learning Combinations of Letters](#)
- If you are comfortable writing in the language, start learning how to type.
- If your course has written assignments, use the corrections you receive to practice concepts you struggle with.
- Find basic reading material online, such as children's stories.
- Read advertisements for products you're familiar with.
- Read news articles you find online.
- Write a paragraph of response or reflection on a cultural topic in your textbook.

Sample Study Plan for Beginners

Day 1

- Read the week's lesson: highlight key points, take notes, write down questions. **(15 minutes)**
- Vocabulary: Pick 10 new words. Say one sentence aloud that includes each word. **(5 minutes)**
- Make flashcards for all new vocabulary words. **(20 minutes)**
- Listen to textbook audio files. Try to repeat each phrase or sentences out loud. **(15 minutes)**
- Practice saying short sentences based on the lesson. Imagine scenarios in which you could use the vocabulary, like greeting someone or going to the market, and think of all the things you might say in those situations. **(5 minutes)**

Day 2

- Practice flashcards made yesterday. Sound out each word as it comes up. **(15 minutes)**
 - Grammar: Copy down examples of new grammar, then write sentences of your own. (If learning a new script: write down words in the script, and say full sentences aloud.) **(15 minutes)**
 - Read a dialogue from the book aloud. Listen to the audio track of the dialogue. Read the dialogue aloud while recording yourself. Listen to the dialogue again. Repeat. **(15 minutes)**
-
- Take the dialogue and try to imagine it in different situations. Say it out loud with the differences. If it is about greetings, for example, say it out loud with changes for different

scenarios, such as greeting older or younger people, or men and women. **(15 minutes)***

Day 3

- Practice all flashcards made so far. **(20 minutes)**
- Create your own dialogue. Write lines down first, then act it out without looking. **(15 minutes)**
- Find pronunciations of words not in your audio files. Use [Forvo.com](https://forvo.com) or Youtube. **(15 minutes)**
- Writing/script: Write sentences on this lesson or previous lesson topics. **(10 minutes)**

Day 4

- Listen to all audio files for the lesson. Repeat each phrase or sentence out loud. **(15 minutes)**
- Review flashcards. **(15 minutes)**
- Review grammar from the lesson, and make [Flashcards for Grammar](#) if desired. **(20 minutes)**
- Choose a few flashcards, and say several sentences aloud that include each word. **(10 minutes)**

Day 5

- Try to use the words and vocabulary you know to tell a story out loud. It can be very basic (something like “this is a man, his name is Tom, he is from Pennsylvania”). Try to tell as many stories as you can. **(15 minutes)**
- Use [backchaining](#) to pronounce the hardest words on your vocabulary list. **(15 minutes)**
- Choose any category (people, food, transportation, etc) and say all words you know in that category without looking at your notes or book. **(15 minutes)**
- Reread the dialogue you created on Day 3 and continue it in writing. **(15 minutes)**

Day 6

- Review flashcards. **(15 minutes)**
- Record yourself speaking, listen, and record yourself again to hone pronunciation. **(15 minutes)**
- Watch a TV show or Youtube video. Listen for phrases such as “hello” and “how are you” and others that you can understand. Focus on the way the characters say them and try to imitate them. **(20 minutes)**
- Write down questions for your conversation partner. **(10 minutes)**

Sample Study Plan for Intermediate

Day 1

- Read the week’s lesson: highlight, take notes, write down questions. **(20 minutes)**
- Make flashcards for all new vocabulary words. **(20 minutes)**
- Choose several flashcards, and say a sentence aloud for each word. **(10 minutes)**
- Choose different flashcards, and write out a sentence for each word. **(10 minutes)**

Day 2

- Act out both parts of a dialogue from your book. Repeat at least once. **(15 minutes)**
- Listen to all audio and/or videos for the lesson, repeating as needed. **(15 minutes)**

- Browse a shopping website in the language. Look up any new words. **(15 minutes)**
- Make grammar flashcards if desired, or create sentences that use new grammar. **(15 minutes)**

Day 3

- Watch a TV show in the language without, then with, subtitles. **(15 minutes)**
- Review flashcards for all new vocabulary words. **(15 minutes)**
- Create a dialogue of your own. Write it out, then recite it without looking. **(20 minutes)**
- Review grammar flashcards or sentences from Day 2. Then, create new sentences orally without looking at notes. **(10 minutes)**

Day 4

- Review all flashcards from this week and previous weeks. **(20 minutes)**
- Watch the same TV show. Choose a character to follow closely. Pause the show after they speak and reply to what they say, or comment on their actions aloud. **(20 minutes)**
- Listen to several audio tracks. Record yourself saying the same thing, and compare with the native speaker. Repeat. **(20 minutes)**

Day 5

- Listen to all audio for the lesson, repeating after each section. **(15 minutes)**
- Find a short article online. Read it several times. Look up new words. **(20 minutes)**
- Act out the dialogue from Day 2 or 3. Add extra lines orally without using notes. **(15 minutes)**
- Practice handwriting by writing a short paragraph on a topic of your choice. **(10 minutes)**

Day 6

- Review all flashcards. **(15 minutes)**
- Watch a Youtube or other video. Note any new words or questions you have. **(15 minutes)**
- Choose one topic (person, event, cultural practice) and say everything you can about it without looking at notes. **(15 minutes)**
- Reread all materials for the lesson. Make sure you did not miss anything. **(5 minutes)**
- Compile questions for your conversation partner. **(10 minutes)**

Learning Grammar on Your Own

Learning the grammar of a new language can be one of the most challenging parts of acquiring it, but it is very necessary. **Essentially, a language's grammar is a connective framework that allows words to be combined and modified in ways that make meaningful speech.**

But there is a lot of difficult terminology related to grammar, and it can be hard to grapple with such abstract concepts. The following points will help you make sense of all the terminology and come to an understanding of your language's grammar, using real examples and online resources:

- **Whenever you encounter terms like these which you do not know the meanings of, you should look them up on [Simple English Wikipedia](#).** "Nouns, verbs, accusative, genitive, cases, adjectives..." You may be familiar with a few of these grammatical terms, depending on your educational background. Certainly, some of them will be used in your language textbook to describe the grammar of the language you are learning. (The regular

Wikipedia website often defines these terms in more difficult ways, so Simple English Wikipedia is better, since it is designed for people who are learning English and gives very clear and easy to understand definitions of any term you might encounter.)

- **You should find examples of the new grammar** in sentences from your book and write them down to study them. Grammar, since it is abstract and connective, is hard to get a hold of when studied in isolation. It is a pattern that creates meanings that relate those words to one another. So seeing grammar in context will show much more clearly what its function is. See [Flashcards for Grammar](#) for a technique to memorize and study these examples.
- **Practice the grammar in speaking.** You should not do rote repetition, but instead think of some topic that you could address using the grammar you are learning and the vocabulary you know. For the future tense, for example, you could imagine what you will do the next weekend. You would then say out loud sentences using different verbs in the future tense to describe what you will do. If you are learning adjectives, you could imagine describing the appearance of things in your room (or the appearance of something that matches the adjectives you have learned).
- **Use the grammar in your written assignments.** Your textbook will have chapter-based exercises for practicing the new grammar you have learned. **Avoid those that are formulaic and just use substitutions of forms, or that are repetitive drills.** Find creative writing assignments so you can write a whole paragraph in which you make sure to use the new construction.

NOTE: If your book doesn't have any creative assignments like this, **think of the vocabulary and grammar you know so far and come up with a topic you could write about.** Use the new grammar in a short essay about that topic. For example, you could practice the past tense with a paragraph about your favorite weekend, or you could practice the verb "to be" by listing people and describing what they are.

Using Search Engines to Learn

One of the best tools to help you in your language learning is easily accessible – online search engines, like Google. You can use them in many ways to facilitate your study and find real, authentic language use to use as your own model. Here are several practical activities you can do with any search engine:

- **When you are learning new vocabulary words, you can use online image searches to help understand what they mean.** Put the word into a search engine, and see what images come up. You can see what kind of imagery is associated with the word. You can even use these pictures in your flashcards if you are using an electronic system (Also see [Resources for Making Flashcards](#) and [Flashcards for Vocabulary](#))
 - **If you just do a regular text search, you can also see how a word is used in context.** You can take the examples and study them to inform your own use of a particular word. This can be particularly useful for learning grammatical words, since they have no meaning of their own but form patterns to connect individual words into larger units. Some methods of learning these examples can be seen at [Flashcards for Grammar](#) and [Learning Grammar on Your Own](#).
-
- **Google Translate can be helpful for translating individual words or phrases.** Go to

[Google Translate](#) and select the appropriate input and output languages. When you translate from English to the language you're learning, or vice versa, you will often see a list of several words. You can print out this list and bring it to your conversation partner or mentor to discuss which one is appropriate. NOTE: Using Google Translate for whole sentences can work for languages more similar to English such as French or Spanish, but tends to produce very wrong results for languages that are more different.

Learning through Online News Sources

You probably are already well aware of the abundance of information you can find on the internet. One important resource among all this content is news in a huge number of languages. Chances are that even a less commonly taught language will have some news resources, since internet access has spread to almost every part of the world. This article will give you tips on how to make use of those news resources in your language learning.

First we should talk about some characteristics of the language used in news and why it is useful for learning a language. Consider news articles in English as an example. We'll look at an example from BBC news:

"Theresa May has refused to promise unconditional support for her successor's Brexit plan."

Asked if she would back whichever Brexit outcome the next prime minister achieves, including a no-deal Brexit, she said that amounted to agreeing to "whatever happens in future".

Jeremy Hunt or Boris Johnson will be announced as the winner of the Tory Party leadership race on 23 July."

Let's note a couple of features of this kind of English. This will help us know what to expect from news in your target language.

1. The diction is impersonal, as if the journalist isn't present in the story despite being the writer.
2. The author uses formal diction, participles, and more complex phrases than usual in speaking, like "Asked if she would back whichever Brexit outcome the next prime minister chooses, including a no-deal Brexit, she said..." In more relaxed speech, you might say this like, "when they asked her if she'd back whatever plan the prime minister chose, even if it's no deal Brexit, she said..."¹

You should expect this kind of language in news you read in your target language, adjusting for the sorts of constructions and vocabulary that seems more formal in that language. It might occur to you that this is far from the language of daily conversation, and what really is the use of it? It's not an uncommon question from students reading news articles for the first time after learning in a more communicative way. If you can't speak this way, what's the point?

But news articles are very important for developing your proficiency. They will acquaint you with a more formal register of speech and vocabulary without the pressure of speaking (a 'register' is a way of speaking a language that is used in a particular context). Not being able to at least understand the type of language used in news articles means that you will be in the dark when hearing official announcements, doing paperwork, or listening to speeches given by important figures. You need the sort of language you find in the news to discuss the big topics of the day and to learn about the

goings-on in the places where your target language is spoken. It is also important so you can have high level conversations or study areas of your interest in the language.

Now that we've talked about the what and the why of studying news in your target language, let's talk about how to find and target your news consumption for your needs.

Targeting Your News

When reading news, it can seem daunting to decide what to read. Maybe you don't read much news in your own language, or you have trouble finding articles by just scrolling front pages. Here are some tips that can help you learn to enjoy and benefit from reading news in your target language:

1. Identify your interests: Write down the sorts of events you follow in English. Four or five topics will do, or less if that's all you can think of. Look up the relevant vocabulary to describe these events. It could be things like sports, politics, video games, or any other interest you have.
2. Use a search engine: do a keyword search in the language for the topic, using the 'news' tab available on many search engines.
3. Try to read some of the headlines, and choose a few articles to read.

Once you have some articles to read, you just need to work through them at your own pace, taking note of and learning new vocabulary as you go with [your memory system](#). You can also ask native speakers you know, such as a teacher or online conversation partner, to provide you with articles that you are interested in.

Understanding Bias/Slant in News Sources

Just like in English-language journalism, foreign news sites will have their own biases, especially related to controversial social or political issues. Usually these will go unstated and can be hard to detect without native-level cultural knowledge, but there are ways you can identify this bias. You don't have to avoid reading news sites because of this. You will find, though, that discovering these cultural fault lines will help improve your own cultural literacy.

Here's a couple of ways to explore bias and editorial slant:

1. Discuss the headlines of one of your sources with a native speaker. Ask what the reputation of the news source is, if any.
2. Read editorial opinion pieces. This is where the slant of the paper will come out the most, since there isn't a need to filter viewpoints through the same journalistic standard as news articles.

Conclusion

We've covered:

1. What to expect from the language in the news.
2. How to target and find news according to your interests and learning needs.
3. How to notice editorial slants in news to aid your reading and improve cultural literacy.

Hopefully, after this you will keep reading the news in your target language and make it a core part of your language learning as you reach higher levels of proficiency.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-48787708>

Maintaining Proficiency Outside of the Classroom

It's easier to learn a language with the support of a classroom. Regular homework, the pressure of attendance and getting a good grade, as well as the physical presence of a teacher or tutor provide motivation to keep up regular practice. But what should you do when you don't have this support system? Here we'll discuss how to maintain your language proficiency, and even improve it, when you've left the classroom after graduation or for a long break.

1. Maintain your Memory System

(If you haven't checked out the articles under [Memory Systems](#) and figured out a way to track the vocabulary and grammar you learn, you might want to do that before reading ahead)

The most important thing you'll need to maintain what you've already learned is your memory system. Whichever one you've chosen and used to study throughout the year will be the greatest tool for you when class is gone. Unlike the textbook, which presents the author's view of the materials, your memory system will remind you of how *you* learned the material and organized it mentally.

Don't just forget about your flashcards or notebook after you're done with your semester. It's okay to take a week or two as a break, but you should get back to reviewing the material systematically over the course of each week. As little as thirty minutes a day or an hour every two days will help keep it all fresh in your mind.

2. Keep Studying

As alluded to above, you need to maintain a regular study plan to maintain your proficiency. The thought of doing homework or studying when you're out of school might sound stressful, but learning a language is hard work. If you leave it by the wayside for too long, you'll soon find you've forgotten what you already knew and have to go back to relearn, instead of maintaining a consistent level. Let's consider some things to factor into your study plan.

First, while it is very important to keep studying, you need to be realistic with how much time you can dedicate. If you mostly have free time, then you can keep up a study schedule like you did in school or even do more. If you're working a job part or full time, or have other obligations, you need to plan your study so that you'll be able to do it with consistency. Don't plan to study at times you'll be exhausted. This may mean you have to split your study into a few thirty minute to one hour blocks throughout the week, but that's fine. Keeping up a consistent study pattern is more important than studying every single day.

Also, don't just limit your study to review. You can expand your skills and knowledge and add to your memory system. Think of a particular topic you are interested in, or things you would like to talk about. Try to write short essays about it, looking up necessary vocabulary and phrases to add to your memory system. Then try to speak with a native speaker you know or a conversation partner on iTalki (see below for more information) about the topic, and ask the native speaker to offer correction. By adding new material to your repertoire, you will not only maintain your proficiency but expand it.

You should check out other articles in the Language Toolbox to see find ways to continue maintaining your proficiency in as well as learning more about your target language.

3. Benefits of Studying Outside the Classroom

We've mostly been discussing the challenges of maintaining and expanding proficiency outside of a formal academic environment, but the freedom from a strict course schedule also comes with a lot of advantages.

A great resource that has recently become widely available is a decent number of websites allowing you to find a conversation partner. Sites such as [iTalki](#) allow you to pay an hourly rate for a conversation partner. You can see their profile and determine if they can help you with specific subject areas you want to familiarize yourself with. Another important resource is the app [MeetUp](#). You can find local groups of enthusiasts for different hobbies, and these may include groups for languages. Another avenue could be working as an English conversation partner at a local organization that offers English lessons, and trading lessons with a native speaker. If you've studied abroad, you can Skype or use another videochat app to talk to a friend you made there to maintain your proficiency.

Also, being free from academic coursework means you can direct your language learning in the way that you want. If you want to just maintain your current level, you can do that. If you want to learn to talk about new things, or try to specialize and learn to speak and write about certain topics, it's totally possible to do so. Independence is a challenge, but you will also find it is empowering with diligent study and investment of time.

Conclusion

We've discussed how you can maintain, and even expand, your language proficiency. This article should have armed you with a plan and some techniques that will ensure that, even outside of the comfort of the classroom learning environment, you will be able to keep speaking your target language and not let all of what you learned go to waste.

Learning through Movies, TV, and Online Videos

Depending on your target language, there is probably visual media that you can use to help you learn it. Nowadays it's more common to find online video than to watch on DVD or VCR, and with the spread of streaming and sites like YouTube, there are videos available for many world languages. This article will be about the uses of these resources in learning, and also how to find and access them.

Finding Online Video

Some of the best resources, you may already be familiar with. [YouTube](#), for instance, is used by people worldwide and carries video in a huge number of languages. You won't go wrong if you do a keyword search for a topic you're interested in and the language you're learning on YouTube, for example "Sports Hindi".

Depending on the country and language, there may be online streaming services specializing in media from your target language. Just search 'movies in (your target language)' in a search engine and see what you find. If you know a native speaker, you can also consult with them about where to find video media for you to use.

Learning with Video

Now let's discuss how to actually learn with these materials. While you can just watch (with subtitles if available) and try to absorb, unless you already can understand almost an entire video or film, it's better to approach it as something to be studied and practiced. Visual media will be especially helpful for learning about cultural references and ideas associated with the target languages, body language, colloquial speech, and listening comprehension.

1. Tracking what you Learn

A useful thing about visual media is that you can stop and go back to watch what you've already seen to work on comprehension. Whenever you watch something and encounter new phrases or ways of saying things, or even things like body language, you should make sure to record it. That way you can enter it into your [memory system](#) and make use of it yourself later.

2. Learning about Culture

As mentioned above, visual media is an excellent way to learn about how many facets of the culture connect to your target language. Just learning the grammar and pronunciation of a language with vocabulary will never be enough to communicate correctly on its own, rather you need to combine it with cultural input, for which visual media is an excellent resource.

Body language is one of these facets. It can be hard to pick up on how you should be moving when you speak face-to-face with native speakers, when you're focused on a lot of other things going on. Through movies and videos, you can see how people with different identities and roles use their bodies to express while they speak. Studying and imitating this can be a way to help yourself seem more native and communicate better.

Another facet is sayings and metaphors. In movies and shows, people will speak in a way that sounds culturally appropriate to speakers of the language at the time they were produced, so you will hear expressions and sayings that you may commonly encounter with native speakers. You should learn these and use them yourself. Just be careful not to watch movies from more than a few decades ago and trying to imitate that way of speaking. You might end up sound like someone from a different era!

You can also find out about social structure and relations between different groups of people. Movies present an archetypal version of society, where often a single character will stand in for a cultural idea about a certain group of people. Pay close attention to differences of wealth, sex, gender, and place of origin. How do people address each other, what sort of body language do they use with one another? You can record your observations in your Memory System. Learning about these will help you navigate your own place in the culture and better communicate and understand with native speakers.

3. Developing Conversational Material

Another use of visual media, especially more current or classic movies and shows, is to have something to talk about with native speakers. Many languages are associated with strong theater-going cultures, often with attached film industries such as Bollywood (for Hindi movies), Nollywood (for Nigeria), and so on. Just like shows and movies in the languages you already know, people in different cultures discuss their own visual media all the time.

Let's think about how to implement this in conversation. If you've followed the points above, you've watched and studied some shows and movies in some depth. If you're trying to get to know someone, you can ask in your target languages simply, "what shows and movies do you like to watch?" You can listen to what they say, and comment on the ones that you've seen too. You can ask them about their

favorite movie, or what actors they like or prefer. It's a great way to find something in common with someone from a different culture. People might also appreciate that you already know so much about popular culture and can talk about it with them.

Conclusion

We've gone over how to find visual media and how to use it to learn in your target language. We've gone over the uses for it, and why it's important. After reading this article, you should know how to:

- Look for visual media online
- Learn from it, making use of your memory system
- Deploy the knowledge you learned from it

Conversation Sessions



Goals of a Conversation Session

A conversation session is your weekly opportunity to practice your target language. During a

conversation session, **you will spend time speaking with a conversation partner** who has been trained to facilitate spoken language practice. Speaking practice is designed to help you use the language in conversations and role-plays to mimic real-life situations. You will become most comfortable in the language by speaking it as consistently as possible.

What a Conversation session is NOT

Conversations are a time to speak. Your conversation partner will be able to answer some questions in order to enhance your understanding of the language and improve your speaking ability. However:

- Conversation sessions are **not a time to drill grammar, take lots of notes, or study from your book**. Conversation partners are not there to “teach” you the language. You should come to every conversation session having already studied on your own and prepared as best you can by using your book and other resources available to you.
- Conversation Partners are trained to leave **5 minutes at the end of each session for questions** in English. If you have an urgent question that will prevent you from participating at your fullest, you may ask at the beginning and quickly move into conversation time.

What can you expect from a conversation session?

Every conversation session will look a little different depending on the language and the number of students present, but all sessions include the same components:

- **Greeting each other and saying goodbye** using culturally appropriate gestures and phrases.
- Conversation sessions involve multiple **role-play scenarios**. These can be used to practice a variety of topics: a group of vocabulary words, a grammatical concept, or a cultural situation you might encounter. Role-plays help you become comfortable using grammar and vocabulary you might need when navigating life in your target language.
- You and your conversation partner might **ask each other questions about your classes, activities, schedules, or opinions**. At the intermediate and advanced levels, you and your conversation partner might start to discuss more abstract topics.
- During the semester, you will **read or watch, then discuss, videos about important traditions, holidays, or events from the culture you are studying**. Discussing these with your conversation partner will enrich your understanding of your target language country.

Your First Conversation Session

Going to your very first conversation session can be daunting because you haven’t learned much of the language yet. Because you have studied only the first lesson or chapter of your book, you will not be able to speak in the language for the entire session. This is expected. Below are strategies that you can use to make the most of what you DO know how to do in the language.

Recite the alphabet

-
- Your book will open with an explanation of your language’s alphabet and sounds. For more information about learning sounds see the articles under [Writing Systems and Sounds](#).

- Your language might have an alphabet song. Search for “[Language] Alphabet” on YouTube. If you can find a song, listen multiple times – and try to sing along!

Use the dialogues in your book

- Does your book start with meeting or greeting other people? Most books will start with basic language about how to introduce yourself. Recite the dialogue as many times as you can, to the point where you have it fully or nearly memorized. In your session, you will be able to concentrate more on pronunciation and less on remembering what to say. Remember to listen to the corresponding audio tracks from your book.

Modify Sentences to Say More

- Modify the basic sentences you have learned so far.
- For example, if your book’s dialogue includes the question, “How are your mother and father?” you could modify the question to “How are your friends?” If the dialogue says “I am American”, you could replace “American” with another nationality. Explore which new words are available to you and work them into your practice.

Learn Short, Useful Phrases

- One way to use less English in your conversation session is to take short phrases you might say in English and use phrases in your target language instead. Learn shorter phrases such as “I don’t understand. Please repeat?” and use them as often as possible. Also see: [Useful Expressions for Conversation Sessions](#).

Note for Heritage Speakers

([Tips for Heritage Learners](#)) If you grew up speaking this language or passively hearing it at home, you might be familiar with most of these introductory words and phrases already. This means that the first conversation session might seem like it will go very easily for you. However, you can still find ways to study effectively and fill in the gaps in your knowledge:

- **Go through the entire assigned section carefully** to see if there is anything new to you.
- **Listen to all audio files** for the chapter.
- **Study the alphabet or script carefully** and read the phrases/dialogues in the books while you listen to them.

Also remember that in your learning the language, you might have internalized certain grammatical mistakes and are repeating them without realizing it. While listening to your audio and reading the book, note if anything is different than how you or your family speak, and ask your conversation partner about it.

Your First Conversation Session - Video

Making the Most of Your Sessions - Elementary

Prepare to spend your conversation session speaking. You will need to engage with your conversation partner and act out scenarios in the language. Do the following tasks to prepare yourself:

- You will feel much more confident in your conversation session if **you have already practiced the dialogues and vocabulary words in your book out loud** a few times. Practicing dialogues by yourself will help you concentrate more on pronunciation and less on what to say next. You will also be more comfortable modifying dialogues with new vocabulary if you have already practiced the original.
- Come having used all the resources that your textbook and syllabus/study guide have given you for that week. **Read the assigned section of your book thoroughly** to be sure you didn't miss any details.
- Was there a conversation preparation guide in your syllabus? Listening material from your book? Go over these thoroughly. **Those resources will empower you to speak more confidently** when you go to your conversation session.

Come with Questions

Each week, you will find something in your book or your study guide that you have a question about:

- Make sure that you **keep track of these questions** as they come to you – have a list ready when you come to your session.
- **When asking questions, don't forget to use phrases in the target language.** At the beginner level, you will find yourself wanting to switch into English a lot. Resist the urge and always try to use the target language first, even if you know you will have to use English to ask a particular question.

Push Yourself

During the first weeks of your language course, it seems like there is little to say at each conversation session. **Filling the whole time with conversation in the target language might be repetitive at first** because you are repeating the basics you have learned over and over again at each session. Remember that solidifying these basics is the best practice to set yourself up for comfortable speaking in the future.

Think of what else you can do to engage during the session:

- **Look over your vocabulary lists** from the sessions you have done. How many of these words have you used in a session? What could you do to insert them into your conversation? For example, if you have been practicing introductions, try introducing some new words into the scenario. Instead of "Hello. My name is Yannick. How are you?" try: "Hello Yannick. Are you a farmer? Do you have a book? Do you like tomatoes?"
- **Try to keep adding whatever you can**, even if all you do is string many short sentences together. For more specific tips, see the article: [Say as Much as You Can](#).

Be Patient with Yourself

Learning another language is hard! You will find yourself making mistakes over and over again, and it might feel like you are always struggling to understand. Remember that **struggling with the language is normal and it doesn't mean you aren't doing well** – the small steps of progress you make each week will eventually accumulate into meaningful and tangible interactions in the target language.

Making the Most of Your Sessions - Intermediate

At the intermediate level, you are already comfortable with the basics of conversation: hellos and goodbyes, exchanging pleasantries, and giving information about yourself and what you are doing. **Intermediate-level conversation sessions should help you build on these skills** by filling in gaps in your vocabulary and helping you master more grammatical structures. You will begin to create longer sentences and express feelings about or describe concrete topics.

When you come to your session...

Come Well Prepared

- When you go over the dialogues and examples of new grammar and vocabulary, you will find some familiar terms, as well as new ones. **Keep careful track of all new words you are learning in a notebook or on a computer.** Make flashcards for all of them as well (Also see: [Why Use Flashcards?](#) and related articles).
- **It's likely that your assignments will include longer dialogues, or longer readings, which you will need to dissect and analyze.** Use highlighters and sticky notes (or other tools you find useful) to draw your eye to new words, phrases, or grammatical concepts. You and your conversation partner might act out a dialogue or share your thoughts on a reading, so it's important to have studied them ahead of time.
- **The listening component of your study is still very important.** When you listen to audio sources, try to emulate what you hear. Your pronunciation will benefit if you keep practicing throughout the week in addition to your conversation sessions. Don't be afraid to speak to the wall, the mirror, or a friend in order to sound out the new dialogues and listening exercises that you have each week.

Come with Questions

Keep track of your questions about all new material. **At the intermediate level, you are expected to always ask questions in your target language**, and switch to English only when absolutely necessary. At the beginner level, you practiced asking, "What does _ mean?" Now, look up how to ask for more specific questions or explanations, i.e., "Is this a noun?" or "Please explain this to me."

Push Yourself

You are already comfortable with simple conversation, and this is a perfect time to build on that foundation. Ask yourself **what else you can say to create more conversation**:

- In your sessions, think of an extra detail, an opinion, or an experience you can add to what you're saying. For example, if you are role playing buying clothes you might say, "I want this shirt." What else could you add? "I want a very soft shirt. Cotton shirts are my favorite. I'll go to school every day in this shirt," etc.

What you can add will depend on the vocabulary and grammar concepts you have learned in your course so far. **What is important is that you can start bringing a new thought or idea into each encounter.** Forcing yourself to think hard to use what you already know improves your ability to think on your feet and say what you mean. For more tips on having successful conversations, see the articles under: [Strategies for Conversations](#).

Making the Most of Your Sessions - Advanced

At the advanced level, you can string phrases together to create longer sentences. You are beginning to offer opinions more confidently and analyze reading and listening material. Your proficiency will improve as you engage with difficult material and think critically in the target language. Your conversation sessions will help you become comfortable narrating multiple tenses, role-playing complicated scenarios, and speaking about topics of personal and public interest.

When you come to your session...

Come Well Prepared

In an advanced course, **your study sources are longer and more complicated.** Use the resources in your syllabus, and any outside sources you find, to challenge yourself in reading and speaking:

- When you read a dialogue or a chunk of text, **read it multiple times and look up all new words.** After reading, take time to voice your thoughts on the material out loud to yourself for about a minute afterwards.

For **listening practice**, continue using resources from your syllabus, and think about any other resource that might be available to you for more practice:

- Is there radio you can listen to online from another country?
- How about TV shows or Youtube channels?
- The more exposure you can get to both formal and colloquial speaking patterns, the better.

There should be a **speaking component of every study session** you have. It will be hard to gain more advanced speaking skills if you speak only once per week at your conversation sessions:

- In particular, it's important to **practice creating with the language** (i.e., speaking your own thoughts and ideas instead of reading a dialogue in your book aloud). If you practice consistently during the week, you will engage more readily with your conversation partner and the topics in your session.

Come with Questions

You can now **ask your conversation partner longer questions in the target language.** When

appropriate ask your conversation partner their thoughts and opinions on the topics you are covering.

- If you have a longer reading or listening selection, online activity, or something similar, **write down some questions about it and go over them with your conversation partner.** Make it a lively back-and-forth. Asking and answering questions is a great way to make yourself think on your feet and hone your conversational ability.

Push Yourself

At the advanced level, you can say a lot and understand a lot. Now is the time to ask yourself questions about the gaps in your proficiency and where you want to go from here.

- In the session, what vocabulary would make the conversation easier? What else would be helpful to know about a particular topic? When you are talking to your conversation partner and can't find the best way to express what you want, **ask them about it immediately.**

The best way to continue advancing in proficiency is to **speak as much as you can in your session.** Challenge yourself to use the new structures and vocabulary words you've learned as much as possible, and keep exposing yourself to the language at every opportunity.

Strategies for Conversations



So while it is important to continue studying vocabulary and grammar, **there are also strategies you can use to improve your communication right now**, making the most of the language you have already acquired.

Learning and using communication strategies can help you to:

- **Perform better on oral proficiency evaluations** by effectively demonstrating what you know.
- **Interact with native speakers**, making casual conversation more enjoyable and logistical situations easier to navigate.
- **Make better conversation at any level of language learning**, whether you are a beginner or an advanced speaker of the language.

Acknowledgement

The suggestions in this section are based in part on experience helping students prepare for Oral

Proficiency Interviews and in part on [Boris Shekhtman's book *How to Improve Your Foreign Language Immediately: Foreign Language Communication Tools*](#). The book is a quick read and relatively inexpensive, so you might want to read it yourself.

We especially recommend this book for any student who will be taking an Oral Proficiency Interview or other oral language examination for U.S. government sponsored scholarships, fellowships, or jobs.

Say as Much as You Can

The more you say in the language, the more you are showing what you know. Obviously this is helpful in a situation where your language ability is being evaluated. It can also make casual conversations more comfortable and enjoyable:

- In a conversation with a native speaker, if you give very short answers to questions, **that puts more of a burden on the native speaker** to come up with additional questions and keep the conversation going.
- **This feels unnatural, more like an interview than a conversation**, and it can be an uncomfortable situation for both of you.
- **It could also cause the native speaker to give up on the interaction**, and then you would lose out on the opportunity to practice speaking.

When someone asks you a question, **don't give a one-word answer if you possibly can say more.** And don't stop at one sentence either:

- **Expand on the topic of the original question, or move onto related topics.** If someone asks you about your favorite food, you might say that you love lasagna.
- From there, maybe you say that your grandparents came from Italy, or talk about your mother's amazing cooking, or your favorite Italian restaurant, or tell a story about a time when you tried to cook lasagna but you forgot to boil the noodles, or discuss your opinions about the slow food movement.

Obviously how you can expand on a topic will depend on your level in the language, **but even a string of very simple sentences is better than a single word:**

- Maybe you say, "I like lasagna. My mother makes good lasagna. She is a good cook. My father does not cook. He is a doctor. He works in a big hospital..."
- In this string of short, simple sentences, **you have given the person with whom you are conversing five different pieces of information** that could spark follow-up comments and/or questions.

When you are talking, you may hear yourself making mistakes, searching for words, or stumbling over your sentences. **That's okay. Just keep talking even if you make mistakes or are uncertain.** Usually the person you are speaking with is eager to let you express yourself and will ask questions for clarifications or offer a little help along the way.

(These suggestions are based in part on Boris Shekhtman's book [How to Improve Your Foreign Language Immediately: Foreign Language Communication Tools](#))

Learn Phrases for Clarification

As early as possible in your language learning, **learn and practice phrases in the target language that you can use to clarify when you don't understand something.** For example:

- I don't understand.
- Please repeat.
- Say that again.
- More slowly please.
- I don't know/remember how to say ...
- What does ... mean?
- Do you mean ...? (restating what someone said to you to make sure you understood correctly)
- I'm trying to say ...
- Tell me.
- Show me.
- Help me.

You may be able to find these types of phrases in your textbook. If not, look them up or ask your conversation partner. You can bring your list of high frequency phrases in the target language to your conversation session(s) and refer to it for a couple of weeks at the beginning of the semester. After that, aim to memorize your high frequency phrases. You can use flashcards or other techniques to help you [memorize](#) them.

You should **use these phrases in the target language instead of asking in English:**

- **This will be valuable practice for real-life situations** where you need to clarify what a native speaker said.
- In a social situation, **this can help keep a conversation going** instead of having one or both speakers give up on the interaction.
- When handling a practical situation such as asking for directions, **it can make the difference between getting where you need to go or becoming even more lost.**

Also **learn some questions that will help you to pick up new words and phrases** in the language. For example:

- How do you say ...?
 - What is this called in [language]?
 - What's the word for ... in [language]?
-

Listen for Main Points

In order to have a successful conversation, **you need to understand what someone is saying to you.**

- Whether you are a beginner or have been learning the language for years, **you probably do not know as much vocabulary as a native speaker of the language**, so chances are you will not understand every word that you hear.
- Instead of getting caught up on the words that you don't know, **focus on what you do understand.**
- **Even if you do not know every word, often you can figure out the gist of what someone is saying, or at least the main topic.**
- Focus on the words that you already know and words that you can guess the meaning of (words that are similar to English words or to words you know in the language, as well as names of people and places). Don't worry about words that are completely unfamiliar.

In casual conversation, usually it is enough to understand the main point of what someone is saying. **In a situation where you need to listen for detailed information** (like phone numbers, addresses, or directions):

- Ask clarifying questions.
- Have the person repeat the information to you again, and/or repeat back what you think you heard to make sure you understood correctly. Also see: [Learn Phrases for Clarification](#).

One way to practice listening for the main points is through **extensive listening** activities (See: [Extensive Listening](#)).

(These suggestions are based in part on Boris Shekhtman's book [How to Improve Your Foreign Language Immediately: Foreign Language Communication Tools](#))

Use Simple Language

You won't be able to speak as elegantly in your new language as you can in your native language. But often you can get your basic point across using simple language that you have already learned.

It's better to say something in a simple way and be understood than to try to make a more complicated sentence and not be understood, or to freeze up altogether because you just don't know enough of the language to form a more complicated statement. **You can simplify both the words you use and the grammar/sentence structure.** For example:

- Maybe you don't know the word for "calculus" but you can say that you have "math" class on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
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- Or perhaps you don't know the word for "gigantic" but you can say "big" or "very big."
- Instead of "On my drive to school every morning, I pass by the chocolate factory, where I have always dreamed of working as a taste tester," maybe you can say, "Every day I drive to school. I pass by the chocolate factory. I want to work there someday. I want to test the chocolates."

Dealing with Words You Don't Know

When you run into a word you don't know, **you can also try to work around it by giving a description or example:**

- If you don't know the word for "submarine" you could explain that it's like a boat that goes under the water, or for "hypocrite" you could give an example of a person who says they care about the environment but always throws trash on the ground.
- **Gestures** can often be helpful as well.

Think in the Language, Don't Translate

You should **try as much as possible to think in the language you are learning**. Try to avoid thinking in English (or another language) first and then translating your thoughts into the language you are learning:

- If you think in your native language, **you will probably think in terms that are too complicated for you to express in the language you are learning**, requiring vocabulary and grammar that you haven't learned yet.
- Also, because grammar and sentence structure differ between languages, **you may end up forming sentences that sound awkward or even unintelligible because you are trying to use English grammar** instead of the grammar of the language you are learning. (For example, you cannot translate a sentence such as "I really like ice cream" word-for-word into Spanish, because the Spanish version is more like "The ice cream pleases me a lot" ("Me gusta mucho el helado").)

By thinking in the language you are learning and sticking to simple vocabulary and grammar, you can use what you know to communicate more effectively.

(These suggestions are based in part on Boris Shekhtman's book [How to Improve Your Foreign Language Immediately: Foreign Language Communication Tools](#))

Practice Asking Questions

When you practice speaking, both on your own and in your conversations sessions, **make sure you practice asking questions:**

- If your conversation partner always asks all the questions and you just answer them, then **you won't get enough practice with asking questions.**
 - **Often the sentence structure for a question is different** than the sentence structure for a
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basic statement, and you need to be comfortable with both forms.

In a social conversation, usually there is a back-and-forth, with both speakers taking turns asking and answering questions:

- **If one person is doing all the asking, the conversation can become more like an interview**, and both speakers might feel uncomfortable.
 - **Questions can also be useful for steering the conversation** toward topics that are more interesting to you or subjects that you can talk about more easily. (If you want to talk about music, you could ask the other person what kind of music they like.) Also see the article: [Develop Comfortable Discussion Topics](#).
 - **Questions are also essential for practical situations where you need to get certain information**. For example, if you are booking a hotel room you might want to ask about the price, how many beds are in the room, whether any meals are included, etc.
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(These suggestions are based in part on Boris Shekhtman's book [How to Improve Your Foreign Language Immediately: Foreign Language Communication Tools](#))

Develop Comfortable Discussion Topics

It is helpful to have certain topics that you are very comfortable discussing in the language you are learning:

- **Talking about a familiar subject that you have practiced many times takes less effort**, so it can feel like a bit of a break in the midst of a more challenging conversation.
- Boris Shekhtman refers to these prepared topics as **“islands” where a non-native speaker can rest while “swimming” in an unfamiliar language environment**, and he recommends memorizing short monologues until they can be recited automatically.

If you don't want to memorize a paragraph word-for-word, **practicing a topic over and over will still make it much easier to discuss that subject in the future**.

- You can practice in your conversation sessions and any other time you have the opportunity to talk with native speakers (or with other learners).
 - But since those opportunities may not come very often, **you should also practice on your own**.
 - **Have conversations with yourself out loud, playing both parts**. The more often you practice speaking about the same topic, the easier it will become.
 - **You can even use flashcards to help with your conversation practice**. [In her To Be Fluent blog](#), Stephanie describes making flashcards that have a question on the front (Do you have any siblings?) and prompts on the back (name, work, residence, description, etc.), all written in the language she is learning.
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Choosing Topics to Practice

When choosing topics to focus on, pick subjects that are important or interesting to you and that will be helpful in conversations with native speakers:

- **Practice some personal topics** such as talking about your family, your daily routine, your studies and/or work, your favorite book or movie, a hobby that you enjoy, etc.
- **You can also work on non-personal topics, especially ones that relate to places where the language is spoken.** For example, if you are studying Turkish, you might practice talking about Turkish music or literature, discussing the different political systems in the U.S. and Turkey, or comparing the geography and climates of the two countries.
- (But again, **you should choose the topics based on what you like to talk about**, as well as your level in the language. As a beginner you may want to stick to personal topics.)

Steering a Conversation

When a conversation becomes challenging or fades into uncomfortable silence, **you can steer the conversation to one of your comfortable, practiced topics.**

- **One way of doing this is to ask a question that relates to the topic.** (For example, if you want to talk about your favorite book, you could ask the person you are talking with whether they like reading, or about *their* favorite book.)
- You can also try to **make a bridge from the current topic of conversation to the subject you want to discuss by stepping from topic to topic** (Shekhtman calls this “linking”). If the conversation is about taxes but you’d rather talk about your family, you could say something like this: “My friend helps people do their taxes. She and I went to high school together in Vermont. My parents still live in Vermont. My mother is a doctor, and my father is a teacher...”

Shift the Conversation Away from Difficult Topics

Sometimes in conversation a topic will come up that you just aren’t able to talk about in the language you are learning. Even if you are trying to use simple language, you might just not have the right vocabulary to discuss a certain subject. In these cases, **it can be helpful to shift the conversation to a topic that you can talk about more easily** (perhaps one of your comfortable, practiced topics or “islands”):

- **You can take either a direct or indirect approach to shifting the topic.** The most direct way is to simply state that it is difficult for you to talk about that topic and to suggest changing the subject.
- **Alternatively, you can try to introduce a new subject in a subtler way.** For example, if a native speaker has asked you a question that you cannot answer in detail, you could give a short, simple answer and then ask a question on a different (perhaps related) topic.

Develop Comfortable Discussion Topics - Video

(These suggestions are based in part on Boris Shekhtman's book [*How to Improve Your Foreign Language Immediately: Foreign Language Communication Tools*](#))

Getting Input



What is Extensive Reading?

When students read in a language they are learning, they often read slowly and carefully, perhaps stopping to look up words in a dictionary or identify all the instances of a particular verb tense. This is referred to as careful or intensive reading.

In contrast, **extensive reading involves reading easier material, but more of it:**

- The idea is to **read material that is interesting and relatively easy to understand.**
- **That way you can read quickly, without stopping to look up words or re-read** a paragraph that you didn't quite catch – the way you would read if you were reading for pleasure in your native language.
- With extensive reading, **you are focused on the *content***, rather than linguistic elements like vocabulary words or verb tenses.

Extensive reading can benefit language learners in a number of ways:

- It can **increase your reading speed and reading comprehension.** You will be exposed to large amounts of language, and your vocabulary will grow as you encounter new words and reinforce already-learned vocabulary. (As a child, you probably learned much of your native language vocabulary through reading.)
- Extensive reading **can also help with grammar**, since you will come across many examples of grammatical patterns used in context.
- You might notice that **your listening, speaking, and writing skills benefit as well.**
- Since you should choose materials that you find easy and interesting to read, **extensive reading can also be fun and help keep you motivated** to continue learning the language.

This is not to say that you should abandon careful or intensive reading altogether. But it is important to understand the difference so that you can choose appropriate materials and strategies for both intensive and extensive reading. A text that might work well for intensive reading could be too difficult for extensive reading. If that's the case, find something easier for your extensive reading, and have fun with it!

In some Five College Center for the Study of World Languages courses, **intermediate and advanced students choose reading and listening materials** as part of their weekly assignments. It is usually most effective to **do a mix of both careful or intensive reading and extensive reading**.

Even if it is not part of your specific assignments, you might find extensive reading to be a helpful (and enjoyable) supplement to your other language-learning activities, or a fun way to help maintain your language abilities during breaks. As with other language-learning activities, **it is most effective to spread your reading out over time** (ideally doing a little bit every day, rather than leaving it all for the day before your conversation session).

You may also want to read [Choosing Materials for Extensive Reading](#).

Choosing Materials for Extensive Reading

When choosing material for extensive reading (see: [What is Extensive Reading?](#)), **there are two main requirements:**

- The material needs to be **easy enough for you to read quickly**.
- The material needs to be **interesting and enjoyable for you to read**.

How Hard Should the Material Be?

You should choose material that is relatively easy for you, so that you can read quickly without stopping often to look up words in a dictionary:

- You may not understand every single word, **but you should be able to follow the story or understand the main points** based on words that you know and words that you can guess easily from the context.
- If you start reading a piece and find that you can't follow it without relying heavily on a dictionary, **you might still be able to use that material for intensive reading, but you should choose something easier for extensive reading**.

Pick Something Interesting

It's also important to **pick material that is interesting to you:**

- There is no need to read about politics or economics if you're really more interested in music, sports, or food.
- If you *do* really love reading about politics in English and you think you are at a high enough level to understand political news in the language you're studying, then go ahead and give it a try.

- If the content is interesting and engaging for you, **you will learn more and be more motivated to keep reading.**

If you start reading something and find that it is either too difficult or too boring, then stop and find something else to read. **You do not need to finish reading something just because you started it.** In fact, you will probably gain much more by switching to easier or more interesting material than by forcing yourself to struggle through something that is frustrating or boring.

Types of Materials

As for the type of material, there are many possibilities, such as:

- Children's books (picture books, easy readers, young adult novels)
- News articles (including articles on social/cultural topics)
- Blogs
- Magazines (print or online)
- Song lyrics
- Recipes
- Book or movie reviews
- Short stories

Your selections will depend on what materials are available in the language you are studying, as well as your personal interests and your level in the language. **But as long as you read something that is easy and interesting for you, you should get something out of it.**

Some Tips for Starting Out

When you first begin, it is helpful to start with something familiar:

- If you decide to read **a book**, you can choose one that you've already read in English or that you've seen in a movie version.
- For **an article**, pick one on a topic that you know a lot about.
- [In his book *Fluent Forever*](#), Gabriel Wyner recommends **reading and listening simultaneously**. You could do this by playing a video or audio clip while reading a transcript of it. This might help you to stay focused on the story or overall meaning instead of getting caught up on the occasional unfamiliar word, and it will also reinforce the sounds and rhythm of the language.

Extensive Listening

Extensive listening is similar to extensive reading (see: [What is Extensive Reading?](#)), **except with audio or video materials instead of written texts:**

- Instead of listening carefully to a small amount of material, you **choose easy material and listen to a lot of it.**
- The material should be **easy enough that you can understand most of it comfortably**, without having to go back and listen multiple times or look up new words in a dictionary, and without subtitles.

You can find more information about extensive listening [here](#).

Choosing Materials for Extensive Listening

As with extensive reading (see: [Choosing Materials for Extensive Reading](#)), there **are two main criteria when choosing materials** for extensive listening:

- The material should be easy enough that you can understand most of it comfortably (without subtitles).
- The material should be interesting and enjoyable for you to listen to or watch.

If you start listening to something and find that it is either too difficult or too boring, then stop and find something else to listen to. **You do not need to finish something just because you started it.** In fact, you will probably gain much more by switching to easier or more interesting material than by forcing yourself to struggle through something that is frustrating or boring.

Types of Materials

As for the type of material, there are many possibilities, such as:

- TV series
- Movies
- [CultureTalk videos on LangMedia](#) (with transcripts and translations)
- YouTube videos
- Cooking videos
- TV news
- Podcasts
- Radio
- Music

Your selections will depend on what materials are available in the language you are studying, as well as your personal interests and your level in the language. **But as long as you listen to or watch something that is easy and interesting for you, you should get something out of it.**

NOTE: When you first begin, **video may be easier than just audio**, because body language and other visual clues will help you understand what is happening:

- It is helpful to **start with something familiar**, such as a TV series or movie where you know the story.
- If you don't know the story already, you may be able to **find a synopsis of it** to read before watching.
- For something that's not a story, **choose a topic that you know a lot about**. (If you have a copy of [Gabriel Wyner's book *Fluent Forever*](#), he gives some tips about choosing listening materials in Chapter 6.)

Assessing Proficiency



What is Language Proficiency?

Language proficiency refers to functional language ability – basically, **what a speaker can do in a language**.

- Proficiency depends not on knowing *about* various aspects of a language, but rather on **the ability to use the language in real-life scenarios**.
- **Memorizing tables of verb conjugations will not necessarily increase your proficiency**, unless you are able to *use* the new verb forms to understand and communicate information.
- For example: Can you introduce yourself to someone? Can you schedule an appointment? Can you return or exchange an item that you purchased? Can you fill out a simple form or write an e-mail to a friend?

Rating Proficiency

There are different ways of measuring and describing proficiency:

- **At the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages, we talk about proficiency in terms of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.** ACTFL stands for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.
- **We focus especially on the [ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking](#).** You can find all of the guidelines for speaking, writing, listening, and reading [on ACTFL's website](#).

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](#).

Other scales that are based on proficiency include:

- **[The Interagency Language Roundtable \(ILR\) Scale](#)** used by the U.S. government.
- **[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.

What are the ACTFL Guidelines?

At the Five College Center for World Languages, we talk about oral proficiency in terms of **the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking**, developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (also see: [What is Language Proficiency?](#)). When a student does an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), a rating is assigned based on this scale (also see: [What is an Oral Proficiency Interview?](#)).

The ACTFL Scale

With the **ACTFL scale**, we talk about **four major levels**:

- Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior.

The Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced levels are each divided into **three sublevels**:

- Low, Mid, and High.

So if you take an OPI, you might receive a rating such as “Novice Mid” or “Intermediate High.” (ACTFL actually describes a fifth level called Distinguished, but the highest possible rating for an OPI is Superior since OPIs do not test for the Distinguished level.)

What the Guidelines Mean

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines describe what a speaker can do in the language at each level. They are not based on a particular textbook, syllabus, or way of learning a language, so they do not list specific vocabulary terms or grammatical structures that students are expected to know. Rather, **they are concerned with how a speaker can use the language to communicate.** For example: Are you limited to listing words (“apple, carrot, cheese”) and using memorized phrases (“How are you?”), or can you create your own sentences (“Apples are my favorite fruit. I don’t like carrots.”)? Can you ask simple questions and handle a straightforward transaction such as scheduling an appointment? What about a more complicated situation like returning or exchanging an item you purchased?

For details about what speakers at each level can do, you can read [descriptions of the proficiency levels on ACTFL’s website](#). They also have videos of English speakers at different levels, so you can get an idea of what a Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, or Superior speaker sounds like.

Another helpful resource from ACTFL is their [Can-Do Statements for Interpersonal Communication](#). (Scroll down for can-do statements by level.) These are written in terms of simple “I can...” statements and give specific examples of what speakers can do at each level. You can use them to help you better understand the proficiency levels. You can also assess what level you think you are at now, and then think about what skills you should work on in order to move up to the next level (also see: [Self-Assessment with Can-Do Statements](#)).

You may also want to read [How Long Does It Take?](#) to learn about how long it can take to learn a language.

Self-Assessment with Can-Do Statements

At the Five College Center for World Languages, we talk about language proficiency in terms of **the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines** developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (see also: [What is Language Proficiency?](#)). We focus especially on the [ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking](#). You can find all of the guidelines for speaking, writing, listening, and reading [on ACTFL's website](#).

Can-Do Statements

A helpful resource from ACTFL is their [Can-Do Statements](#). These self-assessment checklists are written in terms of simple “I can...” statements and give specific examples of what language learners can do at each level:

- You will notice that the Can-Do Statements **are divided into five different modes of communication**.
- **If you are preparing for an oral evaluation, the Can-Do Statements for Interpersonal Communication (the first column) will be especially helpful.** You can [download a PDF with a detailed checklist](#) for Interpersonal Communication from the website.
- You can use the Can-Do Statements to assess what level you think you are at now. Then, look at the Can-Do Statements for the next level up and think about what skills you still need to work on to move up to that next level.

Using Checklists

You can also use checklists for setting longer-term goals, based on things like:

- **What level of proficiency will you need** in order to be successful in your study abroad program, internship, volunteer work, research project, career, or other future goals?
- **What skills will you need** to develop in order to reach that level of proficiency? See [How Long Does It Take?](#) to get an idea of how much time it will take to reach your goals.

Other Scales for Rating Proficiency

While the Five College Center for World Languages focuses on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, **there are other scales that are used to rate language proficiency**, such as:

- **[The Interagency Language Roundtable \(ILR\) Scale](#)** used by the U.S. government. You can access self-assessments based on this scale [on their website](#), located on the bottom left of the page..
 - **[The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages \(CEFR\)](#)**. You can find a basic self-assessment grid for the CEFR [here](#).
 - Depending on your career goals, you may find it helpful to become familiar with one of these scales.
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What is an Oral Proficiency Interview?

If you are taking a course through the Five College Center for World Languages, you may have what is called an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) conducted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) official testing service at the end of the course. We use two different types of oral evaluation, so some students will not have an OPI. **If you are not sure what type of oral evaluation you will have, you can ask your course organizer.**

- **Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs) are done by telephone and typically take about 20-30 minutes.**
- **This type of oral interview focuses on what the student can do with the language.** There will not be any grammar questions or any reading or writing. It will be conversation, possibly a role play or two.
- **An OPI is not based on a particular textbook or syllabus, so there is no way to predict exactly what questions or topics will come up.**
- **The interviewer will typically ask open-ended questions** to see how you respond and then follow up based on your responses.

Difficult Questions

You should be aware that the interviewer will ask some questions you cannot answer. This is perfectly normal and does not mean that the OPI is not going well. The interviewer needs to find both the “floor” (what you can do with the language) and the “ceiling” (what you can’t do yet). So there will be some difficult questions when the interviewer is looking for the “ceiling,” but you don’t need to worry that you are doing poorly just because you can’t answer every question.

You can find more information about Oral Proficiency Interviews [on the testing agency’s website](#).

ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

When a student does an Oral Proficiency Interview, **a rating is assigned based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking.** For information about the proficiency levels, see [What are the ACTFL Guidelines?](#) or read about them [on ACTFL’s website](#).

The testing agency will issue an official certificate with your rating, and the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages staff will send you this certificate by e-mail after the end of the semester.

If you will be taking an OPI, check out our tips on how to prepare:

- [Preparing for an OPI - Level I](#)
- [Preparing for an OPI - Level II and Up](#)

You may also want to read [Say as Much as You Can](#) and other articles in [Strategies for Conversations](#) for tips on taking your language proficiency as far as it can go.

What is an Oral Proficiency Interview? - Video

Preparing for an OPI - Level I

When a student does an [Oral Proficiency Interview](#), a rating is assigned based on [the ACTFL Guidelines for Speaking](#).

At the Five College Center for World Languages, **we expect that for most languages students in Level I will perform at the Novice level.** At this level, students are expected to do only very basic things with the language using simple expressions and sentences. (NOTE: We expect that students in Cantonese for Mandarin Speakers I will perform at the Intermediate level. See [Preparing for an OPI - Level II and Up.](#))

OPI Review Activities/Topics

Here are some activities and scenarios appropriate to Level I, that you can practice in your conversation sessions and in your independent study time to get ready for your OPI:

- **Can you greet the interviewer appropriately**, ask him/her how s/he is, and respond appropriately when the interviewer asks you? Practice variations on this.
 - **Can you tell the interviewer about yourself** and respond to questions about yourself? If the interviewer asks you to tell about yourself, what all can you say? Things you may have learned and may be able to tell about or answer questions about are:
 - where do you live? where are you from? what is your nationality?
 - where do you study? what do you study? what language(s) do you speak?
 - do you have siblings/brothers or sisters? where do they live? what do they do?
 - who is in your family? what simple things can you say about each family member?
 - what you or others look like (I am short. I have black hair.)
 - **Can you tell the interviewer about things you do every day?** Practice giving descriptions of typical days for you or for other people you know. For example:
 - what time do you get up? what time do you go to bed?
 - what time do you eat your meals?
 - what other things can you say you do?
 - **Can you say which subjects you study and which subjects you like or do not like?** Can you say what subjects your siblings or friends study and what they like or do not like?
 - **Can you respond to questions asking you to list or describe things?** Such as:
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- what is in the room?
- what is in your bag?
- where is Amherst? where is Northampton? (ANSWER: Massachusetts, United States)
- indicate the size or height of something/someone - big, small, tall, short
- indicate the color of something (The chair is red.)
- **Can you respond to yes/no questions?**
 - do you like coffee?
 - did you get up at 7 this morning?
 - do you have a pencil?
- **Can you list things when asked?** For example:
 - what foods do you like?
 - what do you like to do?
 - what would you like to buy?
- **Can you count and give someone your phone number?**
- **Can you use expressions with the interviewer that help you get another chance to understand what s/he said?** For example:
 - I don't understand.
 - Would you repeat what you said?
 - What does [insert word] mean?

This is a general list. **What you can do may vary depending on the material covered in your course.** Because an OPI follows a conversational format and is not based on a particular textbook or syllabus, **there is no way to predict exactly what questions or topics will come up.**

The interviewer will typically ask open-ended questions to see how you respond and then use your responses as the basis for asking follow-up questions. Keep working on the types of basic skills listed above. These are the same skills you need to use the language in everyday life.

Difficult Questions

You should be aware that the interviewer will ask some questions you cannot answer. This is perfectly normal and does not mean that the OPI is not going well. The interviewer needs to find both the “floor” (what you can do with the language) and the “ceiling” (what you can’t do yet). So there will be some difficult questions when the interviewer is looking for the “ceiling,” but you don’t need to worry that you are doing poorly just because you can’t answer every question.

More Information

If you would like more information about what is expected at the Novice level, **you can read descriptions of Novice speakers and see videos of Novice speakers in English [on the ACTFL website](#).**

Another helpful resource from ACTFL is their [Can-Do Statements for Interpersonal Communication](#). These are written in terms of simple “I can...” statements and give specific examples of what speakers can do at each level. You can use them to help you better understand the proficiency levels. You can also assess what level you think you are at now, and then think about what skills you should work on in order to move up to the next level.

You may also want to read the articles under [Strategies for Conversations](#).

Key points:

- Expect conversation and possibly a role play or two. Practice basic conversational skills in your conversation sessions.
 - Make sure you can greet the interviewer appropriately (practice formal language if appropriate).
 - Practice saying that you don’t understand or asking the interviewer to repeat.
 - Say as much as you can to demonstrate more of what you know.
 - Don’t panic if you can’t answer every question fully! Hard questions don’t mean you’re not doing well; it’s just part of how an OPI works.
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Preparing for an OPI - Level I - Video

Preparing for an OPI - Level II and Up

Because an OPI (see: [What is an Oral Proficiency Interview?](#)) follows a conversational format and is not based on a particular textbook or syllabus, **there is no way to predict exactly what questions or topics will come up:**

- **The interviewer will typically ask open-ended questions** to see how you respond and then follow up based on your responses.
- When you respond to the interviewer, **you are giving that interviewer clues about what you are able to talk about**, so use the opportunity to talk about what you know.
- **Say as much as you can**, based on what you know. Longer responses usually demonstrate more of what you know.

Practice conversation and role plays in your conversation sessions. These might be simple interactions or more complicated ones, depending on your level.

- **Push yourself to say as much as you can** about whatever topic you are discussing.
 - You can also practice this on your own in between conversation sessions, speaking out loud and playing both parts in the conversation.
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ACTFL Ratings

When a student does an Oral Proficiency Interview, **a rating is assigned based on [the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking](#)**. You can look at ACTFL's [Can-Do Statements for Interpersonal Communication](#) to get some ideas of topics and situations to practice at different levels.

If you have taken an OPI in the past (perhaps at the end of the previous semester):

- Check the rating you received and then **look at the Can-Do Statements for the next level up**.
- **Think about what skills you still need to work on** to move up to that next level.
- If you haven't taken an OPI yet, you can **use the Can-Do Statements to estimate your level and identify strengths and weaknesses**.

More Information

For more information about the proficiency levels, see [What are the ACTFL Guidelines?](#), or you can read descriptions of the proficiency levels on ACTFL's website. ACTFL also has [videos of English speakers at different levels](#), so you can get an idea of what a Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, or Superior speaker sounds like.

NOTE OF ENCOURAGEMENT: When you take an OPI, **you should be aware that the interviewer will ask some questions you cannot answer**. This is perfectly normal and does not mean that the OPI is not going well. The interviewer needs to find both the "floor" (what you can do with the language) and the "ceiling" (what you can't do yet). So there will be some difficult questions when the interviewer is looking for the "ceiling," but you don't need to worry that you are doing poorly just because you can't answer every question.

You may also want to read the articles under [Strategies for Conversations](#).

Key points:

- Expect conversation and possibly a role play or two. Practice conversation and role plays in your conversation sessions.
- Say as much as you can to demonstrate more of what you know.
- Don't panic if you can't answer every question fully! Hard questions don't mean you're not doing well; it's just part of how an OPI works.

Preparing for an OPI - Level II and Up - Video

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