

Back to the Basics

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As we accelerate along the “information highway”, we are all aware that the speed at which our world is changing, in terms of technology, is almost beyond comprehension. As language teachers, we have a responsibility to our students and ourselves to keep abreast of what is out there, narrowing our focus to the features of this “techno-explosion” that can best be utilized to promote faster and more effective language acquisition.

In doing so, though, we must be wary of viewing these new aids to learning as anything but aids. While scanning the electronics market in search of ever better teaching methods it’s easy to be swept along by the hype and the glitter. In our profession, it’s important to bear in mind that we are still human beings working with human beings who are attempting to accomplish a complex and time-consuming task.

No matter what techniques, textbooks, audiovisuals or software we choose to use, a significant percentage of our students will, without a doubt, experience frustration, boredom, and despair along the way, and some of them will give up. What follows is a set of “tips” for learning a foreign language which can help recharge and refocus those who falter.

These points were developed primarily for students, but may also help to remind teachers of what we already know but sometimes forget. Perhaps one day microchips or some other such device will be implanted into our brains for instantaneous language acquisition, but until that time an occasional glance at these guidelines will provide a motivational boost for those learning language the hard way.

General Tips for Adult Learners

1. Accept the fact that regular study and practice is the only way to master a language.
2. Be open minded to the new culture as well as the new language and you will progress faster.

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3. Recognize that if you don't have a good sense of your own language's grammatical structure, you will have a harder time putting together the pieces of the new one.
4. Accept the fact that rote learning of grammar rules, vocabulary, verb tenses, etc. is essential and can't be avoided.
5. Don't be surprised and never feel embarrassed about how much repetition you need—you aren't stupid—it's normal and inevitable.
6. Recognize that children learn differently from adults, and that we all favor certain learning styles over others. Some of us respond better to visual cues, others to auditory input, etc. Determine what works best for you and use that information.
7. Take heart extroverts—people who are unafraid to speak up and enjoy chatting in their own language will usually be willing to experiment more quickly in another language.
8. Take heart introverts—extroverts who speak sooner often make more mistakes and get locked into those mistakes forever—a shy person who is determined, patient, and willing to take a few risks has a very good chance of speaking comfortably and correctly with time.
9. Don't compete with others, compete with yourself. Although some competition can be motivating, it often impedes progress and encourages self-pity.
10. Be prepared and willing to make mistakes; you will make thousands. If you feel like a baby speaking baby-talk, so be it. Remember that babies are masters of persistence and therefore great models for us all.
11. Clear some space in your life, clear your mind with some deep breathing—and study at least five minutes a day.
12. Remember there are no secrets or shortcuts to learning a language. It's hard work, but doable—be positive and realistic.

Tips for Beginners

1. You can hope but don't expect to learn a new language quickly, especially if you are an adult and monolingual. Remember how many years it took you to learn your native tongue well and recognize that language acquisition is a never-ending process.
2. Don't expect there to be a direct correlation between all words, phrases, verb tenses, etc. from one language to another. Accept the differences in languages and you will learn faster.

3. Don't get in the habit of asking questions about the language that are far beyond your level and ability to understand. Be patient and avoid unnecessary frustration.
4. Utilize your opportunities for exposure to the new language—if you can listen to and/or participate in real-life” conversations—by all means DO IT!
5. If you are still too shy to tackle conversation, start with passive listening activities to increase your comprehension and vocabulary listen to language cassettes, radio, TV programs and movies in your target language.

Tips for Intermediates/Advanced

1. Try to avoid too much self-criticism for not progressing fast enough—it's unproductive and blocks learning. If you keep trying, you will keep learning—you'll see.
2. Be aware that translating from your language to the new one in your head before you speak is a normal part of the process and will lessen as you get more fluent, but may never disappear completely, especially in adult learners.
3. Remember that all languages, including your own, are loaded with inconsistencies and exceptions to the rules. Accept them in your target language and move on.
4. Recognize that your abilities may vary significantly from day to day—some days you're great and other days you can't say a thing properly. Comfort level, situations, number of people, and personal chemistry play a large part in this.
5. Concentrate on the pleasure and excitement of communicating with others in their language. It will all be worth it.

Tips for Studying in a Group

1. Unless you can't avoid it, don't study language in a large group situation. It is much more difficult to get the verbal practice you need in a crowded classroom than it is in a small group of five or six or one-on-one.
2. Don't be afraid to ask when you don't understand. If you aren't comfortable asking during class, stay after and talk to the teacher alone.
3. If other students disrupt or monopolize, complain to the teacher. If it doesn't help and your learning is affected, change classes.

Tips about Teachers

1. Determine beforehand what kind of system and philosophy a teacher uses. If, for example, your own language is never used to explain the new one or to clear up misunderstandings in class, you may want to look for another teacher.

2. Don't waste time forever searching for the perfect text or the perfect teacher. Not finding them will be a good excuse for not progressing; any truly motivated student can learn in almost any situation.
3. Don't expect your teacher to spoon feed you—learning is ultimately your responsibility. Don't blame or praise a teacher too much. YOU are the one who makes the difference!