



Office of Learning Resources

University of Pennsylvania
Suite 300, Stouffer Commons
3702 Spruce Street
57-EXCEL (3-9235)
lrcmail@pobox.upenn.edu
<http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/lrc>

It's all Greek to me: Learning and studying a foreign language

Are you struggling to learn a second language? Are you dreading the foreign language requirement for your major? Learning a new language is challenging, but there are several strategies that you can use to take charge of your learning and maximize your language potential. Specific tips for developing speaking and listening skills are outlined below.

Speaking in a foreign language

The greatest challenge in learning to speak a foreign language is overcoming fears of embarrassment. Making mistakes, sounding funny, or making social *faux pas* are a natural part of learning a second language. To make speaking easier, try the following suggestions:

- Practice speaking in safe and comfortable contexts. Practice with a trusted friend or study partner. Practice alone in your room while the radio is playing. When you are learning new vocabulary or writing out your homework assignment, read aloud.
- Accept that you will sound strange to yourself for a while. New sounds may also seem strange in your mouth. As you continue to practice, however, your “new” voice will seem more natural.
- An excellent strategy is to volunteer as a conversation partner for an international student (this also helps to build your resume). You and your partner can meet for coffee to spend a half hour speaking English and a half hour speaking your new language.

Listening in a foreign language

Listening and speaking obviously overlap so many of the same strategies can be applied here. Practicing with a study partner or an international friend is your best option. You can also attend language-specific cultural events with a friend and then discuss them afterward in the foreign language.

- When listening, don't assume you have to understand every word. Try to guess the general meaning. Also, use body language, intonation, and context to help you guess.
- Memorize the phrases for “Again, please” and “Slower, please.” Use these phrases often.

- Listen to radio or TV programs in the foreign language. Rent foreign movies and cover up the subtitles on your TV with a large piece of paper. Alternate between trying to concentrate on meaning and just listening to the tone and flow of the words.

Reading in a foreign language

Reading can be a challenge even for advanced language learners. The best overall strategy for reading is to avoid getting frustrated. Your brain literally “turns off” its learning centers when you get frustrated. To avoid this problem, try the following strategies:

- Allow extra time for reading assignments. Accept that you read much slower in your second language
- Preview the reading material. Look at all pictures, the title and subtitles, and the abstract or summary. Then *guess* what the reading is about.
- When reading, don’t look up every unfamiliar word! Read 1-3 sentences, and then try to *guess* the general meaning.

Writing in a foreign language

Whether you are required to write a single sentences or a whole paper in your second language, the following strategies can help:

- Decide what idea(s) you want to write about. Then jot down any relevant words in the second language. Look at what you’ve written, and then try to fill in the gaps. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar at this point.
- When you’ve finished writing down all of your ideas, you should have a good first draft with some spaces left blank for words you didn’t know. Now pull out your dictionary to fill in the missing words and to check spellings.
- Finally, pull out your grammar reference book and check your grammar. You can ask a study partner to check your work, in return for you checking his or her work (a good study strategy!).

As you can see, there are a number of ways that you can take charge of your language learning. A Learning Instructor would be happy to help you develop a plan of study that works best for you.