

HOW NOT TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/productivity/how-not-learn-language-avoid-these-8-common-mistakes.html>

Maybe you have to learn a foreign language to get a new job, communicate with colleagues abroad or just need it because you want to travel and not feel helpless. In any case, you are part of an exclusive club as only about 17% of US citizens are able to speak a foreign language! But apart from the statistics, there is an even more worrying trend. The way foreign languages are taught is full of pitfalls and not many schools are doing it right. Here are 8 wrong ways to learn a foreign language. So if your teacher is insisting on any of these, it might be a good idea to find another school. We need to keep in mind that language study is not a one-size-fits-all exercise as learning styles will vary.

1. Learning grammar rules

The grammar of a foreign language is full of complicated uses, exceptions and fine distinctions. Teaching these rules might be useful when writing an academic essay but at beginner level, grammar will not help a student to understand or to communicate in the language.

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency decided to abandon the grammar based approach when teaching their border agents Spanish. They prioritized the language tasks the agents needed such as communicating with immigrants, calming detained families and explaining legal rights in simple terms. You can see why knowledge of the subjunctive here would be pretty useless! They helped them develop the language skills for these tasks by using role play exercises and videos. At the end of the course, there was a dramatic improvement in their Spanish competence.

2. Learning lots of new vocabulary

Did you know that you only need a limited number of words in any language which are used over and over again? Yes, in English, you can get by for most purposes by just using 300 words. The same goes for most other languages. How do you get to know what these words are in your chosen language? Just download an app such as Anki app on your phone and you are ready to go. The system uses flashcard methods which shows you the new words at strategically spaced intervals to help you remember them. The visual element in helping to memorize new words has been stressed by Tim Ferris. He found that reading comics in Japanese was a turning point for his Japanese language skills.

3. Repeating meaningless sentences

If you find that you are asked to repeat meaningless sentences which have no context or even relevance to you personally, then it is unlikely that you will become proficient in the target language. Stephen Krashen, the distinguished linguist, has made it very clear that unless you can understand the messages from comprehensible input, then there is little chance that you will be able to learn the target language. This, he believes, is the most effective way to learn a language. He illustrates this very clearly in the video below.

4. Reading classics in the target language

Experts now agree that reading classics or even simplified versions of them is not the most efficient way to acquire a language. The language may be outdated and the vocabulary archaic. A better alternative is to read children's books in the target language. This is a great way to get exposure to the language, its essential grammar and vocabulary. Everything is illustrated and the language is perfect for beginners. There is an added advantage in that if you know the story of a fairy tale then that is a great help to contextualize new words and be able to guess their meaning correctly.

5. Underestimating listening skills

The key to communication is understanding what people are saying in your target language. If you neglect this, then you are on the road to failure. Many schools make listening a rather boring exercise and insist on answering comprehension questions which are barely relevant. The result is that students' listening skills are way below par and this is an obstacle to effective communication.

Listening must be a daily exercise. With MP3 podcasts, TV shows, news broadcasts, radio, YouTube and a host of other resources, the choice is embarrassing. Students need to listen when they are jogging, commuting or eating alone. This is the easiest and cheapest way you can get to full immersion which would, of course, be ideal.

6. Learning a language the traditional way

Studying grammar and memorizing endless lists of words is not the best way at all. There are now apps which are widely available and I, personally, think that they can complement more traditional methods, so maybe a mixed approach is best. Did you know that one free app called Duolingo has 50 million users? Experts have said that one college term of language tuition is equivalent to using this app for about 35 hours. But some learners yearn for more formal verb tables and a more structured approach, so find out what works best for you.

7. Not exploiting cognates

“Mastering the vocabulary of most European languages means simply learning to recognize a number of old friends under slight disguises.” – Henry Sweet
Cognates are words which are similar in English and other languages. For example, English and Spanish have lots of words which originally derive from Latin. Learning about cognates is often underestimated because people are obsessed with ‘false friends’. If you say ‘embarazada’ in Spanish, thinking that it may be the same as ‘embarrassed’, you are telling people that you are pregnant! This is an example of a ‘false friend’. But cognates are a great resource as well and language learners need to be aware of this, rather than obsessed with making mistakes.

For example, the following English words:

- mechanical
- historical
- ideological

- ethical
- cultural

have almost identical equivalents in Dutch, German, Swedish and Norwegian.

8. Seeing learning a language as a task

Those students who regard the whole language learning process as a means to an end or to achieve a certain goal are going to find the task an uphill one, if they are not passionately involved

The best way to approach it is to regard it as opening up a box of opportunities to learn about a new culture, to enjoy new literature, movies, computer games, and songs. All your favorite activities can be done in the language you are learning. Chat to new friends on Skype, update your status on social media and reply to emails. Organize a trip to the country to try out your new language skills. This will make the whole process so much more enjoyable and also make your learning really much easier.