



District 5360 Youth Exchange Information Sheet #9 – Learn the Language



You are expected to have started learning the language of your host country before you leave Canada. Don't wait to find out how you can do this—the sooner you get started the better equipped you will be at the beginning of your exchange!

Finding an instructor, whether it is part of a class or private tutoring, is a much better way to get started with a language than by using books and tapes etc... However, there are circumstances where the language you need to learn is not taught in your community. In this case, see what your local library has to offer for language instruction tapes/books. If the library has nothing to offer, then you may have to buy them at a bookstore or Internet website (such as amazon.ca). Keep in mind that books or tapes are usually targeted at tourists.

For language courses, here are some places to check:

- Rotex, Inbounds, community members
- The yellow pages under Schools, Languages
- Language teachers at your high school might know what is available in your community
- Local multicultural clubs may offer language classes.
- Check with the embassy/consulate for the country you are going to—they may have some recommendations.
- Check with your local library, community college, anywhere that runs Continuing Education programs

One series of language tapes/books that has been around for a while is the Berlitz Cassette Packs. Although they can be a bit tricky to track down (in other words, don't wait until the last minute), they do cover the following languages: Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Japanese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish (and Latin-American Spanish), Swedish, Thai, and Turkish.

Some web sites that you may be able to find some more information at are:

- <http://www.word2word.com/coursead.html>
- www.travlang.com/languages
- www.ilovelanguages.com

But just doing a “Google” search for your language of interest will likely turn up lots of online resources. Keep in mind that information on the web is not always accurate or detailed, and like books and tapes, is more likely targeted at what a tourist needs to know to ‘get by’ on a holiday.

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Getting Started

Learning a language is actually a lot easier than it may appear to be. The first step is to approach it as a fun challenge. Get excited about learning something new and it will make the whole process a lot easier.

Technology makes learning a language fairly easy. Audio players are a great aid for those spending time in transit or trying to learn a language while doing something like cleaning. Even going to school all day, getting 8 hours of sleep and allowing for one to two hours for work and homework should leave you with some time each week – during these minutes, put in the cassette tape or go over some vocabulary briefly. It will make a world of a difference. Buy some books, a learning guide, and some cassette tapes or CD's. Then make sure to have plenty of time for practicing your new skills.

Vocabulary

The best initial vocabulary to learn are the target language's semantic primitives, since these meanings are represented in every language, and they present the *most basic* communication framework for adult language learners. Note that semantic primitives are meaning-based, and your target language may express many of the meanings in a very different way compared with English and other languages. There are many ways of learning vocabulary. Try them all and use what is most effective for you.

Think in whole phrases and with emotions. Memorize not only words but a whole sample phrase with the emotion felt. E.g. (Spanish) To remember the word 'bread' -- 'pan,' memorize the sentence, 'I eat bread with butter.' -- 'Como pan con mantequilla.' (Imagine you are eating the bread.) Some call this Total Physical Response.

Likewise, imagine visually the word or action you learn. Can you see the bread with butter in your mind's eye, even for a flash? This is a sign that your cerebral hemispheres have synched and the newly learned word will be available without conscious recall. Include other senses too. Smell the bread, feel the bread crumbs, taste the butter, etc... Repeat the whole phrase or sentence until you can say it without hesitation, like a reflex - just like a karate move. Language *is* reflex.

Substitute words from your new language into the language you speak normally. This will, of course, cause fewer problems if you confine this to conversations with people you have notified of your strategy. You can also try to think in your new language. Use as many words as you can in the new language. If you don't know how to say something, you can look it up later. The key is usage. E.g. (French) To make a cheese sandwich, put *fromage* between *deux* pieces of *pain*. This is referred to as code switching, especially when done unintentionally by bilingual speakers.

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Substitute words from your native language into your new language. This strategy helps beginning learners with small vocabulary to converse comfortably and maintain motivation. However, in the long run this method slows the continuing learner down; replace this method with describing the missing word in the new language when they wish to use a native language word for which they haven't learned or can't remember a new-language translation.

Do not underestimate the usefulness of sticky-notes! You can put them on things at home before you go, or on things in your host family's house after you arrive.

Read the dictionary. Make it a habit to skim or browse through the dictionary and note a few words that are obviously part of common everyday speech. Write down new words in two columns, one for your native language and one for the language to be learned. Then go over them day after day in alternate directions and carry those words you didn't remember so far over to a new page. The repetitive writing often helps memorizing.

Write down words on index cards or blank business cards, the target language on one side, the known language on the other. Carry a reasonable number in your pocket, purse, etc. and study them when you have unexpected free time.

Use mnemonics:

Try making an animated, nonsensical story based on the word. The word for bread in a number of languages is *pan*, which is spelled the same and sounds similar to the English word for cooking pan. Imagine batting a loaf of bread with a pan or hitting a bread monster with an oversized pan. Including all sensations to their extremes helps. When developing a mnemonic, take note that humorous, vivid or shocking phrases will help you to remember the new words. Some commercial vocabulary programs offer vocabulary training based on animated cartoons of mnemonic associations between words in the learner's native language and a target foreign language. One program, 200 Words a Day, advertises vocabulary learning at the rate of 200 words a day for native English speakers learning the languages of Spanish, French, German, and Welsh.

Speaking and understanding

While riding the train or car, walking down the street, waiting in line, etc... simulate conversations and dialogues in your head. Carry a pocket dictionary/grammar book with you for this purpose. Talking to yourself out loud while showering will force you to voice sentences without making you feel ridiculous.

Repeat and memorize whole sample phrases and sentences which embody grammatical rules. Grammar requires calculation before speaking, so speak from a memorized sentence pattern instead. Make a quota of phrases or sentences to memorize per day, depending on your

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schedule. For most people, memorizing 1 or 2 model pattern sentences everyday is not too difficult.

Most new languages contain unfamiliar sounds. Practice them ad nauseam! Make yourself drill sentences full of new sounds and repeat them all the time. For instance, in French, "Il fait de la voile" can be used to practice French "f"s, "v"s and "d"s, or "un grand vin blanc" for French nasals.

Watch movies in the language and pretend or imagine that you already understand. TV shows and radio broadcasts are also good ways to practice a language. Get the melody of the language by listening to songs you like and singing them. By doing this, you can reduce your accent and almost unconsciously memorize a lot of phrases. Get the lyrics though, it may be very difficult to understand the song without them. When at the very beginning learning the language, learning children's songs may be very helpful (and can be very amusing for the learner, making them easy to remember).

Listen to radio broadcasts in the language through the internet. It is not important that you understand every word, or even that you actively pay attention to the broadcast. Rather, a good idea is to have the radio on in the background as you are doing other things. This will allow you to get used to the sounds and intonations of the language, and thus be able to isolate individual words from a general stream of spoken language. The Deutsche Welle's slowly spoken news reports (in German, of course) is a good examples of what you can find out there. International french radio and the BBC offer broadcasts in 19 languages, including one in "easy french". Watch English movies subtitled in the language and vice-versa.

Use your computer to help you learn a language by installing programs or games using your target language. For example if you use Firefox web browser you can install a version in your target language. If you use a Mac, open System Preferences, select International, then Language, and put your new language at the top of the list. (Then everything that can will appear in your new language.) Windows allows you such an option in the regional preferences in the Control Panel, and most Linux distributions are straightfoward as well. When installing an operating system, there is usually an option to pick a language or languages to install.

Speak with a native speaker. Often there are local gatherings of native speakers for the sole intent of speaking. Listening or participating can be useful. Tandems (regular meetings with a partner who speaks another language) are often useful. E.g. if you know English and are learning Thai, you can meet weekly with a Thai who wants to practice their English. Talk in Thai for the first half of the meeting, then in English for the second half. But be aware that trying to do this with a friend who already shares a common language with you can be less effective, since you may both be tempted to just converse more easily in the common

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language. Finding a stranger (through local universities, advertisements, or language communities) can therefore be more effective. Depending on the chemistry between you and your partner, you might find it awkward with little in common to talk about, or you might become great friends and have some interesting conversation practice.

Pronunciation

Remember that improving your pronunciation can help you to understand when someone speaks (as you better understand what the sounds represent). You don't have to be perfect, but if you improve your pronunciation a bit, you might improve your communication a lot.

Try not to simply pronounce the words as if they were written in your native language. Listen to how the locals pronounce it. Especially if you like doing things systematically, learn the pronunciation rules of the language. Work out what is different about the way native speakers speak, compared to your own native language and accent. The "neutral state" of the mouth is different in different languages, and if you learn what it is and imitate it, your pronunciation will automatically improve.

Do they keep their tongues further forward in the mouth?

Do they often curl their tongues back (like the English "r")?

Do they speak from the back of the throat?

Sit down with a native speaker and go through the alphabet. Ask them to help you pronounce the letters like a native speaker. Sometimes it helps to ask where they put their tongue when pronouncing a certain letter.

Reading and writing

Do not underestimate reading. Read in the language as much as you can. Try children's stories first, moving on to newspapers and magazines as your vocabulary builds. Reading will dramatically improve your vocabulary, your spelling, your grammar and your knowledge of the language culture. It is almost a prerequisite for good writing.

Get yourself bilingual books. Or get a book in the new language and the same book in one you already know. Read them together, matching words in the two languages. It helps if the languages are quite close. For instance, learning Spanish is easier starting from French than from English, because it's easier to see the more general structures. One could watch a favorite film with audio in one language and subtitles of another. Anime fans will be pretty familiar with this method.

A very good "first read" is the book "The Little Prince" by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Originally in French, it is easily available in a lot of different languages. In many languages, it is even online (legally), and can be read for free. The book is short, interesting (even philosophical) and contains simple grammar and vocabulary. Another good book, for similar reasons, is "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" by L. Frank Baum.

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Speed reading doesn't help when beginning to learn a language. Lip read so that you can hear yourself speaking. Speed reading discourages vocalization which is important when starting to learn a language. Speed reading of course has its place, but while beginning a language, a lot of 'hard' reading is required. Fundamental words and sentences need to be mastered. When one feels confident enough or is at an intermediate level, speed reading may help or could even be recommended.

Get a digital dictionary. The much speedier word look-up will greatly ease your first readings. Plus, the clear separation of word meanings (which most paper dictionaries can't afford) will make it easier to grasp new words. Freedict offers a collection of freely available (and modifiable) dictionaries.

Polishing

When you have reached the point where you feel more or less confident reading, try reading a grammar book in and about the language you are learning. It is not as painful as it sounds and will help you with difficult points. It will be both a review of the basic rules and an introduction to the more subtle aspects of every language. The hindsight will make the basic rules sound more clear and natural and you will be presented with a plethora of model sentences to further reinforce them. You will learn (or just review) the most basic and useful linguistic stuff, e.g.: what is a direct object, an adverb, a nasal consonant, an infinitive, a case, etc. Overall, you will end up with a much clearer and organized picture of the language as a whole.

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