

# **HOW TO STUDY FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

## HOW TO STUDY

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**HOW TO STUDY  
FOREIGN  
LANGUAGES**

**Marilyn Lewis**





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*To Rhys and Monica who have helped in so many ways*

# CONTENTS

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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>General Editors' Preface</i>	xi
<i>Author's Preface</i>	xii

## **PART I WHAT IS INVOLVED IN LEARNING A LANGUAGE?**

<b>1</b>	<b>Choosing a language and a course</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1	Why learn another language?	3
1.2	Choosing a language	9
1.3	Choosing a course	11
	Summary of advice	25
<b>2</b>	<b>Knowing a language: what does it mean?</b>	<b>26</b>
2.1	The form of the language	27
2.2	Language use in different situations	32
2.3	Putting language together	35
2.4	Describing language	36
<b>3</b>	<b>Language learning: comparisons and contrasts</b>	<b>41</b>
3.1	First- and second-language learning	41
3.2	Ability and method	46
3.3	Making a difference: Successful strategies	53
3.4	Strategies for better thinking	56
3.5	Organisational strategies	57
<b>4</b>	<b>Language learning: memory and motivation</b>	<b>66</b>
4.1	Information about memory	66
4.2	Factors affecting memory	70

4.3	Techniques for remembering	72
4.4	Motivation and attitude	76
<b>5</b>	<b>Setting goals and measuring progress</b>	<b>90</b>
5.1	What are your goals?	90
5.2	Measuring progress	95
<b>6</b>	<b>Keeping a learning journal</b>	<b>101</b>
6.1	Definitions and reasons	101
6.2	A language learner's journal	110
6.3	Summary of advice	119
 <b>PART II STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION</b>		
<b>7</b>	<b>Vocabulary learning</b>	<b>123</b>
7.1	Finding new words	123
7.2	Understanding word meanings	125
7.3	Recording new words	126
7.4	Remembering new words	129
7.5	Self-testing	131
7.6	Using new words in natural language	132
<b>8</b>	<b>Listening to a new language</b>	<b>134</b>
8.1	The listening process	134
8.2	Opportunities to listen	138
8.3	Types of listening	141
8.4	Practical ideas for listening	149
<b>9</b>	<b>Speaking fluently</b>	<b>151</b>
9.1	The process of learning to speak	151
9.2	Making opportunities to speak	157
9.3	What do I say?	163
9.4	Practical ideas for speaking	166
<b>10</b>	<b>Learning grammar</b>	<b>168</b>
10.1	Processes of learning grammar	168
10.2	Practising grammar	176
	Summary	180

<b>11</b>	<b>Reading for several purposes</b>	<b>182</b>
11.1	The process of reading in a new language	183
11.2	Types of reading	188
11.3	Reading in action	189
<b>12</b>	<b>Literature in the language course</b>	<b>197</b>
12.1	Why study literature?	197
12.2	Making the most of your literature study	199
<b>13</b>	<b>Writing in a new language</b>	<b>203</b>
13.1	Levels of writing	203
13.2	General advice	207
13.3	Practical ideas	210
<b>14</b>	<b>Culture and language learning</b>	<b>213</b>
14.1	What is involved in studying culture?	213
14.2	Sources of information about culture	217
14.3	Cultural knowledge for particular contexts	219
14.4	Cross-cultural communication	223
	Conclusion	231
<b>15</b>	<b>Language examinations</b>	<b>233</b>
15.1	The content of the examination	233
15.2	Examination techniques	241
	Summary of advice	244
	<i>Questionnaire</i>	245
	<i>Further reading</i>	249
	<i>Index</i>	251

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# GENERAL EDITORS'

## PREFACE

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If you are studying a foreign language the chances are that you are looking for a book that will not only help you get to grips with the basic principles of what is involved, but also a book that will help you develop into a successful language learner. The aim of *How to Study Foreign Languages* is to offer you guidance on how to gain both of these important skills by providing the sort of vital practical information you need about how to organise and improve your learning methods and techniques.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part examines what is involved in learning a language, looking both at the broader questions of course design and choice and at successful strategies for learning, including organisation, techniques for remembering, using a journal as well as modern electronic language technology.

The second part focuses on the key practical issues that face all language learners: vocabulary learning, listening to a new language, speaking fluently and learning grammar. In addition, there are chapters on studying literature in a new language, the importance of cultural contexts, and also advice on writing as well as on exams. As with all the chapters of the book, these can be read separately or dipped into for information or guidance.

In the first instance it may well repay you to read quickly through the book as whole, so that you gain a sense of what studying a new language involves. You might then focus on those aspects which interest you most, or use the questionnaire at the end to assess your learning needs. At once a reference guide to ideas about language study and a practical textbook that will develop your skills as a student of language, *How to Study Foreign Languages* is designed to help you get the most out of your course and to achieve excellent results.

JOHN PECK  
MARTIN COYLE

# AUTHOR'S PREFACE

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People used to claim that only really gifted people could learn another language. Apart from the difficulty of defining what is meant by 'gifted' and how success is measured in the end, this is too simple a statement. By observing many adults who change countries, either by choice or by force of circumstances, we can see that with a combination of motivation and work (and even sometimes with a minimum of these!) plus useful learning strategies people of all ages and educational backgrounds do learn second and third languages.

Furthermore, it is not the case that language learners are either successful or unsuccessful, nor that they do or do not have strategies for better learning. Many studies show that everyone can improve the way they learn, with greater emphasis on learners taking responsibility for their own progress, as well as their teachers' need to be aware of what leads to good language learning. Unless this happens, learners will fall into the trap of sticking to familiar routines (such as memorising word lists by covering up one half, for instance) and not knowing how to solve an unfamiliar task when faced with it.

Language learners and their teachers need to know what strategies they have never thought of using. Traditionally success has meant doing well in particular courses of study, and yet from the viewpoint of learners, being able to use the language in out-of-class situations could be a better yardstick. Some learners have reported doing very well in their formal courses but found gaps once they wanted to use the language with native speakers.

This book is written for students who have chosen to study a language in senior secondary schools or as part of a university degree. There are many reasons for choosing a particular language. Some are utilitarian. People believe that knowing a language will find them a better job, or they want to use it for travel, or the regulations say they must study a language as part of their degree. Others have more personal reasons. Perhaps the language they are studying has been spoken by their ancestors or even by their living grandparents. A third group of students just like learning languages. It could be Japanese or Spanish or Latin. It doesn't matter as long as it's a language.

The ideas in this book come from several sources. A number of current and recently graduated students who were classified as 'successful' because of their course grades in languages were willing to answer a fairly lengthy questionnaire. In selecting 'successful' language learners, a decision had to be made as to how these would be defined. We decided that students with high grades in their end-of-year results would be chosen, although it is acknowledged, even by some of the learners, that their formal success did not necessarily make them highly competent outside class.

We wanted answers from a range of languages, so that the examples could be relevant to as many readers as possible. Questionnaires were designed, drawing on an extensive literature on language learning. These were sent to lecturers in five language departments (French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese and Chinese) for distribution amongst their students. Personal contacts were also used. These students' comments about why and how they studied appear throughout this book. Some of the respondents completed information for more than one language, which highlighted an interesting feature. Students didn't always use the same strategies for all the languages they were learning. The students' replies were included even when they clashed with the 'official' advice about language learning. For example, despite the widely held belief by educators that rote learning is unhelpful, many of the language learners in this study reported using it successfully. At least one was aware of the official viewpoint: 'That's supposed to be wrong isn't it?' he said.

Another source of information for the book is all the books and articles for teachers written on the topic of successful language learning, many based on studies with large numbers of students in many parts of the world. Some of these are included in the Further Reading section at the end. They are based on research from many countries into what makes the difference between success and failure in language learning.

The interest in 'learning to learn' has indeed led to a number of publications, most directed at teachers and a few at language learners. Many of these are in the form of tasks for students to do as they consider the language learning process. They have moved beyond the 'Teach yourself' approach where the writer tended to prescribe the learning process. Learners are now invited to assess their progress, evaluate various techniques and draw on many approaches to language learning. Some of the sources listed at the back of this book provide self-checking materials designed to show students what kind of learners they are. They offer general questions designed to identify learning styles and personality traits, and checklists of strategies for students about their

own study habits. These strategies may be organisational, social or related to thinking and they cover the areas of grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading and writing. They are designed to help readers reflect on what they are doing at the moment and to alert them to gaps in their learning strategies.

Why produce another book on the subject if it has already been well addressed by others? This book is not a classroom text in the sense of providing students with things to do. It is a reference book designed either for reading through or, more likely given people's busy schedules, for dipping into as the need arises. The table of contents and the index are meant to help you dip.

The general message of the book is this. You do not have to be brilliantly gifted to be successful at learning a language. You need a combination of motivation and good strategies. Once you have studied a language, so many opportunities are open to you. In the short term, if you have been alerted to the idea of keeping a diary of your own learning strategies, why not make it available to other language learners? The more we know about the range of strategies available, the easier it becomes to pass on to learners information from which they can select and trial ideas that could turn out to be worthwhile. There are many opportunities now through desk-top publishing for spreading good ideas around. At the same time the book is designed to encourage you to enjoy learning your new language. I've tried to keep it as informal as possible while providing the essential information and ideas. I hope you enjoy it.

MARILYN LEWIS