

Foreign languages: how to memorise vocabulary

To “get by” in a language it takes a vocabulary of about 120 basic words. Anne Merritt explains how to learn them.



Foreign languages: it takes a vocabulary of about 120 basic words to "get by" in a foreign country where you don't speak the language. Photo: Moodboard



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When trying to learn a foreign language, most of us have the same complaint: “I’m just not good at memorising.” Learning new vocabulary can be daunting, especially for busy adults whose minds are already occupied with work, family, and other responsibilities. A comfort? Linguists say that to “get by” in a language, such as directing a taxi or asking for a phone number, it takes a vocabulary of about 120 basic words. It’s a manageable goal, and a firm foundation for beginners. Here are eight tips for getting there:

Set realistic goals

Forget the long vocabulary study sheets, or reading the dictionary. Experts say that learners are capable of retaining 10-20 words per study hour. If you do 15 minutes of self-study per day, set a weekly vocabulary goal of 20-25 words and phrases. That’s only six weeks until the 120-word “survival kit” is learned and memorised.

Cluster

Those one-word-a-day language learning apps may feel convenient, but thematically, they’re all over the place, delivering a chain of unrelated words: envelope, tired, January, receive, onion. Focus on a single theme each week. The mind naturally clusters connected words together, so learning, say, types of weather in one lesson, and parts of the body the next, works in tune with your brain’s natural system for classifying information. However...

Avoid opposites

It might seem logical to study opposites together: hot/cold, expensive/cheap. It isn’t. A learning hiccup called ‘cross association’ can occur, when you learn two words so closely together you end up mixing them up. If a Spanish student learns ‘always’ (*siempre*) and ‘never’ (*nunca*) together, they might later draw on one word when they mean to use the other. Instead, study the more common word first (eg: deep) and, once it’s retained, learn its opposite (shallow).

Dissect new words

When encountering a new word, take a look at its structure. Many words consist of prefixes and suffixes, and an understanding of these parts of speech is advantageous. The French word *désagréable*, for example, contains the negating prefix *dés-* and the adjective-forming suffix *-able*. Studying these affixes can help you to understand conjugation and structure, and make educated guesses when encountering new vocabulary.

Read, read, read

Reading helps you revisit learned vocabulary, and see those words in new sentences and contexts. One excellent source of foreign language exposure is through graded readers, which are designed specifically for language learners. Another good source is advertisements or menus, which tend to use short, colloquial text.

Visualise

One mnemonic learning trick for new vocabulary is the Keyword Method. Drawing on a similar-sounding word in your native language, visualise a picture or scene to go with the new vocabulary. For example, on a trip to Moscow, I remembered the Russian formal hello, “Zdravstvujte” (Здравствуйте) with the mental image of a stressed vulture. These visualisations are often abstract, ridiculous, and embarrassing to admit, but they work, especially for longer words.

Focus on phrases

Linguist Michael Lewis encourages language learning in lexical chunks, rather than on a word-by-word basis. A good portion of daily communication involves predictable common phrases: “turn left,” “just a minute,” “nice to meet you.” When studying a new language, memorise these phrases and you'll have a ready arsenal of dialogue, without the stress of having to build and conjugate your sentences from scratch.

Review often

In a vocabulary class, yesterday's vocabulary is more important than today's. The goal is to transfer the short-term knowledge of new vocabulary into your long-term memory. Review is essential – in the first few days or weeks after learning new vocabulary, recycle those words and you'll entrench them in your memory. A good language textbook or online program will be organised in a way that reviews and applies learned vocabulary in later lessons.

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http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationadvice/9816185/Foreign-languages-how-to-memorise-vocabulary.html#disqus_thread