

LANGUAGE-LEARNING STYLES AND STRATEGIES: READING FOR COMPREHENSION

Being able to understand the text in another language helped me feel self-sufficient. It allows a freedom from dependency on others.

~ Jon DeVries, world traveler

Like an awakening, there's a point when you realize you're relying more on instinct than a dictionary to breeze through your French novel. Even if fleeting, at that moment I've felt like a cultural insider...as if I might have been born in the wrong place. ~ Kristin Mishra, France

If I can read a local newspaper in a place that I travel, it's empowering, exciting. Feels like another window opens on a different world.

~ Steve Theobald, world traveler

Pre-Study-Abroad Reading Activities

Like to read poetry? Science fiction? Cookbooks? Whatever you like to read in English is the best thing to read in your target language before study abroad. Why? Because you'll have the motivation to read it! Here are a few tips for finding resources in your target language:

- Ask your language teachers.
- Check your university or local library's collection for subscriptions to international and national newspapers.
- Search the Internet using your host country's name as your keyword.
- Skim through the phone book for bookstores selling foreign books.
- Talk to a local native speaker for their suggestions.
- Ask fellow students, local native speakers, or your language teacher if you can borrow materials.
- Choose a dictionary that's best for you to aid in your reading practice.

Bilingual dictionaries (English to/from another language) can be misleading because there may not be direct equivalence between the English word and the word in the target language. **Monolingual dictionaries** (single language) can be more helpful in truly understanding the meaning of words, but then you need to be versed enough in the language to understand the definition!

Monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. There are some dictionaries that are both monolingual and bilingual in the same book, which solves the problem of either/or.

Electronic dictionaries make word retrieval quicker. Many electronic dictionaries allow you to store vocabulary you come across when you are out and about. You can review this vocabulary at your leisure, with the dictionary taking the role of flash cards.

Learner dictionaries. Such dictionaries may be more helpful to low-intermediate learners because they make some effort to use simplified language. Nonetheless, be prepared for them not to be simplified enough at times. A classic case is a learner dictionary of English that defined “to moor” as “to secure or fasten to the dock.” The learner didn’t know what “secure,” “fasten,” or “dock” meant, so the definition was useless! In this case, the learner needed also to look up the unknown words in the definition until she finally could understand the word “moor.”

Get the Most from Your Reading

Reading in a second language can be like taking a ride on a roller coaster. There’s frustration – and sometimes fear and self-doubt – when you feel you’re getting nowhere and that you need to look up every word. There’s a big thrill of excitement when you can quickly cruise through and know you understand nearly everything. And sometimes it’s just hard to keep going as you read the same sentence over and over and over. This section contains strategies for helping you with the ups and downs of reading in another language. These strategies have worked for hundreds of students, and they can work for you too!

Strategies for increasing your comprehension

Decide why you need to read it

You probably feel overwhelmed sometimes because you try to understand every word or idea. Determine if you really need to understand the entire text or just get an idea of what the main topic is. In most contexts, you may only need to get the main idea. Then you know whether to read the material thoroughly or just skim it.

Skim read

Gathering clues about the context is critical in increasing your understanding and retention when reading in another language. Skim reading before you read the text from start to finish helps provide this context. You are probably experienced at skim reading, but here are a few reminders:

- Read through all the headings.
- Jump to the end to see if there is a useful summary, discussion, or conclusion.
- Outline the main sections of the text.

Use both top-down and bottom-up tactics

Just as with listening, you may have preferences for whether you are a “top down” or “bottom up” reader. Ideally, you will be able to use both. *Top down* reading is when you already know something about a topic and apply this to a new reading. For example, you are reading an article about AIDS. Since you already know something about the disease, you expect certain topics to be discussed – such as the number of cases reported and the number of countries affected by the disease. This prior knowledge helps you intuit the meaning of the new article. When you focus exclusively on the words and sentences of the text in front of you and use only those words to assist you in meaning, this is referred to as *bottom-up* reading.

If you are a beginning learner, you may find more success in the top-down approach. Also, if your goal is just to get the main idea, you would still use the top-down approach. However, if you intend to get fine details, or if you know nothing about the topic, you may find that the bottom-up approach is probably more what you need.

Don't overuse your dictionary

A good rule of thumb is to use a dictionary sparingly. Why? Because dictionary use:

- distracts you from the text and takes twice the time.
- may cause errors, especially if you use a bilingual dictionary (i.e., an English/Spanish dictionary) because languages often do not have direct equivalents. In some cases, different countries have different dialects of the language.
- may result in your forgetting the meaning immediately after looking it up anyway!

The following is a comment about bilingual dictionaries from co-author Lassegard, who is currently living in Tokyo:

Now that I am abroad, I've learned so much language here 'in context' whether written or spoken that I would find it difficult to give English translations unless I really thought about it. I think trying to get a precise English translation (when there isn't one) is one of the biggest obstacles learners have and results in the overuse of dictionaries, which tends to compound the frustration. ~ James Lassegard, Japan

Consequently, it may be most beneficial for you to learn as much vocabulary as possible in context rather than from the dictionary. But if you are going to use the dictionary, you may wish to have some effective system for recording a meaning. It is often the case that learners keep looking up the same words over and over because they forget the entry immediately after finding it. The more effort you use to figure out the word, the more likely you will be to remember it.

Read between the lines

Keep your eyes open to clues in the reading itself. For example, you are reading in a popular magazine about outdated fashion, and the writer tells you not to wear a shirt with a loud pattern. Does this mean that you should not wear a shirt with musical instruments on it or one that plays loud music? No, you know from the context that it means that the pattern is wild and disturbing, so you would not want to offend or disgust other people by wearing it.

Get some background information first

Before reading a new text:

- Ask someone (a friend, native speaker, or someone with more reading proficiency than yourself) to give you an introduction to it, such as an explanation of the topic. This discussion would give you background information for understanding the text.
- This person can help you define difficult vocabulary in advance.

I had a difficult reading to do for one of my Spanish classes in Venezuela. It was on folklore, so I had no clue where the text would be taking me with the different mythical characters and the things that they were engaging in. However, my Venezuelan friend helped me by explaining certain parts of the text to me, and from this I was able to grasp the concept and understand what I would be encountering in the reading. This was a lot faster and easier than using the dictionary, and it also helped me use my target language to help understand the reading. ~ Tammy Yach, Venezuela

Strategies for remembering what you read

Write summaries

Ever feel like you understand each sentence as it goes by and then get to the end and don't remember anything? This is common! The mind has to perform mental gymnastics in order to get at the meaning from a target-language text. What helps is to make ongoing summaries every few lines. This keeps the meaning of previous material fresh while continuing on to new material. To keep your mind thinking in the target language, try to write the summaries in the target language rather than English. Writing them in English only slows you down by forcing your mind to switch back and forth between languages.

I found that making summaries of each Spanish reading was very helpful. I could always refer back to my notes if I was confused or use it as study material for the test. Other students would always ask me for my notes so they could understand the reading. If they had just made their own notes they too would have easily remembered what they read in the beginning of the reading. A foreign language is difficult to learn, thus when reading and retaining what a second language text says, taking notes is necessary for ultimate comprehension. ~ Carrie Borle, Spain

Generate questions

Continually generate questions about the text as you read along.

Make predictions

When the reading feels slow and plodding – even if the topic seems interesting – it's easy to fall asleep or get bored reading in a target language. One way to stay alert and curious is to predict actively what the writer is likely to write about next. Try turning each heading and subheading into a question, using words such as *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*. Then, predict what the answers will be to each question. While you're reading, notice whether or not your prediction was close to being correct.

For example, you are reading a magazine article with a title that translates to “New Drug Approved.” You'll ask yourself, “What is the drug and what is its use? Who created and approved this new drug? Where can one get the drug? How was it created? Should I use this drug?” You might have some possible answers already floating around in your mind, so you read to find out whether or not your predictions were right. You might be surprised that the drug is more (or less) than you expected!

Strategies for getting feedback

How do you know you are doing a good job reading? This can be a bit of a challenge since reading is basically unobservable unless you are reading aloud, which isn't very common unless you are practicing to give an oral reading. In that case you could have someone check your reading for how natural it sounds. Consider meeting with a teacher during office hours to practice, or get paired up with someone who speaks the target language fluently and read it aloud.

When you are doing silent reading, you could ask a native-speaking friend to read a text you had difficulty with or a portion of it and see if the friend has the same understanding of it as you came up with. If it is a popular novel or essay that your friends have read themselves, you could try and summarize it for them and see whether they agree with your summary. The daily newspaper can be a good source of feedback on reading if you can find a friend who reads it. Check whether your interpretation of a lead story is accurate. You can always ask friends to confirm or correct your understanding of given words as well.

You know you are doing a good job reading when you can read through the text and understand the general concept. You do not let hard words bog you down or cause you to keep turning to the dictionary. You continue reading and make notes while you read. You can always go back to your notes if you do not understand. ~ Tammy Yach, Venezuela