

## Maintaining & Progressing in a Learned Language

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### Abstract

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People often tell me they “lost” a language they formerly learned. As a language instructor for over 14 years, this saddens me because a language should not be forgotten. Why does this happen? No matter how gifted an individual is in acquiring a language he or she needs to practice and review the language regularly. When a language is not practiced or reviewed (even a first language) it can be forgotten—perhaps not entirely but in part, and fluency can become challenging. This paper discusses how to not only maintain what was learned but continue to progress in the target language.

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### *Tips to Learning*

#### Learning Styles

The first key in learning, is to know what your personal learning style is. There are four learning styles: *auditory, visual, kinesthetic and tactile*. Here is a summary of each style:

- 1) Auditory – when a student needs to hear something, benefits from lectures, easily memorizes songs on the radio... that usually means he/she is an auditory learner. Thus to learn, he/she should say things out loud and practice listening.
- 2) Visual – the visual learner is one who learns by seeing. When entering the classroom, the visual learner will immediately glance at the board. Colors, diagrams and drawings are beneficial in helping a visual learner. Color coding notes are also useful.
- 3) Kinesthetic – the kinesthetic learner is what I like to call the “lab” learner. To learn he/she must actually do the activity. For instance, to remember how to get to a place, the kinesthetic learner would have to drive there first (unlike the visual learner who would prefer to see/write directions or the auditory learner who would rather someone tell him/her where to go). Kinesthetic learners benefit from hands-on activities.
- 4) Tactile – the tactile or combination learner resembles the kinesthetic learner inasmuch as hands-on activities are conducive to learning. However, the tactile learner often needs more “stimulation” as in being stimulated by the senses. Consequently, a tactile learner will want to engage in several activities stimulating his/her senses. Examples would include: reading a book while walking on a treadmill, eating a cereal bar while listening to a lecture, taking notes while watching a movie... The tactile learner is often a multi-tasker. While other learners might get distracted doing several activities at once, the tactile learner will greatly benefit from it.

Once a student knows his/her learning style, it is important to use it. If they know they are a visual learner, for instance, they will know that writing things down (taking notes in class) is vital to their learning.

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## **Reviewing**

A key to learning is to not only learn something once but many times. Something must be reviewed many times before it is actually memorized. I have found that to be true in both in my learning and teaching experiences. Thus, it is vital to review information that was learned in class (or out of class). I encourage students to spend ten minutes each night, preferably before bedtime studying whatever it is they want to memorize. "Cramming" information (notably the day before a test) is not effective for long-term memorization.

## **Choice & Motivation**

In a lecture, the student can choose how to receive the given information. Some might take notes while others prefer to just listen. The key is to find what works for you. Even in a topic that is less interesting you can learn something. Of course, studying something of interest facilitates the best learning. For instance, if you are passionate about Ferraris you could research something in the target language pertaining to Ferrari cars.

## **"Thinking" in a Language**

A key to learning a language is to completely "convert" your mind into thinking in that language. This requires a lot of effort and time. But it can be achieved. Even if your target language differs greatly from your native language, you can learn to think—and dream—in the target language.

## **Challenges**

Challenges are unavoidable, but they can be overcome.

## **Literal wording**

A mistake often made by (mostly new) students is to translate literally. Some things can be translated literally while others cannot. In cases such as these, unfortunately, we must accept that "that's just the way it is." This is not the pat answer students want to hear but for certain verbiage or even grammar, there is no literal translation. The key is to find the equivalent—not to translate literally.

## **Expressions**

Expressions are often the hardest to understand. But again the goal is to grasp the general meaning, not analyze the components. Some of the best translators are the ones who can take an expression and find its equivalent—not its literal meaning.

## **Culture**

Culture can be another tricky thing to understand. Traditions from one country to another can vary greatly. Studying, comparing and identifying differences are useful in understanding a country's culture.

## ***Furthering Language Skills***

Many tools can help one further his/her language skills. Here are some suggestions:

## **Classes**

To improve language skills, it is useful to take classes. Even once vocabulary and grammar are acquired, in-depth practices as well as reading literature can fine-tune the mastery of a language. Furthering one's education can often help improve the language.

It can be beneficial to take a college class or private lessons. A refresher course can work wonders, and help weed-out any cobwebs in the brain. A few years back, I gave private beginner Italian lessons to a psychiatrist for two years. After completing the program, the student decided she wanted to take French—a language she had previously learned but she wanted to review some basics. I was surprised how much of her long lost French came back with practice and review—even after many years of “inactivity.”

There are also excellent programs to learn at home. It is up to each individual to find what suits best. If you prefer working by yourself and are self-motivated, a self-taught class might be perfect. But for individuals preferring a group setting, a college class might be ideal. Dr. Shahrzad Zahedi, a fellow professor at MiraCosta College, has pointed out that there are many classes available—some that can be downloaded onto phone or computer for free or almost free.

In 2009, I recorded classes for a company called KnowledgeCity, which offers language classes right from your computer for “basic” and “business” purposes. There are many programs out there for self-motivated individuals who prefer learning independently.

### **Study groups**

Dennis Groenlund speaks five languages fluently (French, German, Swedish, Luxembourgish and English). He suggested being in a study group. “I would recommend students get together, probably once or twice a week and study everything they went over in class from the beginning. This gives deeper understanding of the material, and doing it with other people is always better because one can help the other. Another good idea is to talk in French (or whatever the target language is). It is very important to get used to the language. It is not the easiest thing to do but the outcome is tremendous. It will give you the ability to switch between your thinking. Thus you do not think in English anymore but only in French. It will make you better at writing sentences, essays, and even filling in blanks will become easier. It's easier to correct a mistake that was made in French by thinking French.”

### **Television/Movies**

Many movies are now available in the language one wants to learn. Language graduate student, Sonya Thorne (who is trilingual in French, English & Spanish) suggests looking for movies on Netflix. You can watch the movie in the target language and often choose to have subtitles either in your native language or in the target language (both can be beneficial depending on the goal you are trying to achieve and the proficiency level of the target language).

Erika Toti is half-British, half-Italian and speaks English, Italian and some French. She recommends watching short programs such as “Friends” or talk shows in the target language. By watching shows or movies you already know in your native language you are more familiar which makes it easier to recognize words in the target language. This is especially useful for novice learners.

However, watching movies in the target language can also challenge more advanced students. Developmental and global studies major student Dennis Groenlund suggests for students to “watch children's movies such as French dubbed Disney movies. These are very helpful because it is spoken in simple French and most students have seen the Disney cartoons in English before or know the stories. Thus, the material is not unfamiliar.”

### **News**

Francesca DeMeo spent time studying abroad in Paris and elsewhere. One thing, which helped her maintain her target language, was to “watch the French news online that has video and audio, such as France 2.” Watching or reading the news not only helps the student learn/maintain a language, but also provides a different perspective on what is going on in the world.

## Radio

Listening to the radio in the target language is very beneficial—online or through applications existing on electronic devices such as smartphones. One of my students uses an application on his iPhone that allows him to listen to French radio stations in his car—a practical way to learn the language on his commute to work. Many radio stations exist in different languages.

## Music

Music is another great tool to learn and maintain a language. Even in one's native language, words are not always easy to understand when sung; it takes more effort to understand a song. Another benefit in listening to music is that, if the tune is catchy, words are easily memorized with little effort. Jeremy Lyon, who is half-American and half-French and resides in Marseille, recommends listening to music at bedtime, as the mind will "review" the words during sleep. Andrew Ware, a musician and French student at MiraCosta College, writes some of his lyrics in French. This helps him think about the language.

## Pen Pals

With today's technology it is relatively simple to have a pen pal. Many websites provide easy ways to find correspondents who share similar interests. Letters via regular mail have become less popular, but they are advantageous for language learning since spelling mistakes are not outlined—unlike writing on computer. It takes more effort to write a letter than an email—and that can promote learning. Still, emails, which are not only faster but also free, are a great way to stay in touch with Pen Pals. According to Erika Toti, who formerly worked for the U.N., chats are "another good way to keep up a language." And then there is Skype and Google Hangouts!

## Reading

Reading was what originally helped French high school students Marie Delattre and Marie Brouard who currently live in California, to learn English. Now, they read to keep up with their French in preparation toward the intense Baccalaureate exam. For musician Ruut DeMeo a Finn who has lived in the U.S for over 15 years, reading has been "the most important tool" in preserving her native Finnish language. Dr. Rachel Peragallo, a Harvard University medical grad, says she sometimes reads to herself in French out loud to practice her accent/pronunciation. She borrows books and tapes from a French Library in Boston. Jeremy Lyon, bilingual in French and English, suggests reading a page a day, and finding an unknown word to then research its definition. He also suggests reading out-loud. "Reading even articles can really make a difference", says French native Sandrine Goodey, who has not lived in France for many years.

## Writing

Writing can help challenge the brain to think in the target language. It can be helpful to write your shopping list in the target language. What helped Blake Collins, who studied French at MiraCosta College and then in Paris, was to write a few sentences in French in his journal on a regular basis. Writing short stories, poems, journals—anything really—contributes to helping develop foreign language skills.

## MeetUp Groups

MeetUp Groups exist all over for people who desire to meet others with similar interests, including language. French Canadian teacher Sonya Thorne suggests attending French MeetUp Groups to speak with French speakers and students seeking to maintain the target language. The benefit of MeetUp groups is not just to practice a language but to make friends. To find MeetUp Groups, go to [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com) and search for your key word (i.e. the target language).

## Practice – friends

For Erika Toti, it was only when she *forced* herself to speak French, that she really learned it. She had taken French in middle school and in high school but felt tongue-tied because until she practiced it. She also suggests being open-minded to corrections whether from chats online, on Skype or from co-workers which whom she spoke the language. Dr. Francesca DeMeo enjoys staying in touch with people who speak French. Todd Kincaid and his wife Christie learned the language when they spent time in France. But since living back in Ohio for the last 13 years, maintaining the language has become more challenging. Todd says it is important to “maintain friendships with French speakers.” But what is “key to maintaining the language--specially for those who learned it in adulthood--is PRACTICE”. For Dutch couple Jan and Bettine Huizer who have lived in several countries, speaking to one another in the target language is a habit. When living in the United States, they spoke Dutch to one another. Now, back in Holland, they speak French and German. Bettine, a language teacher, states: “My French is better than Jan's so I correct him. But Jan's German is better than mine so he corrects me.”

## Travels

Probably the number one way to maintain a language is to visit countries where the target language is spoken. Growing up in Southern France, my family and I would spend a few days in Italy every other month. Those mini-trips helped me learn the Italian language. And during the 5-hour road trip I would look up words in the dictionary. (For instance I would see the waves on the Mediterranean, and then look up ‘vague’ (wave) in the French-Italian dictionary—*onda*.) It is easier to travel abroad in Europe, so for Americans whose overseas travel is more limited, it is a good idea to pick vacation spots where the target language is spoken. Doctor Rachel Peragallo vacations to France yearly to keep up with her French. It is important to think outside the box. If you are learning German, you do not necessarily need to visit Germany. You could equally choose another German language speaking country.

## Jobs

When proficient in a language, acquiring a job where that language can be used will contribute to maintaining the language. Many job descriptions from sales to administrative jobs will state “preferences” (such as knowledge of spoken Spanish). These include jobs such as flight attendants, waiters in international restaurants and the more obvious: such as translator or teacher/tutor.

## Research

French Canadian Louis René Simard and his Finnish wife Éeva who live in Maryland, found it useful to “research a subject that really interests those (in the target language).” Eeva Simard, a budget analyst working on her fourth language, believes the same techniques must be used to “stay fresh.”

## Other suggestions

Simple things can make a difference in learning a language. Here are some additional ideas to help convert your mind to the target language:

- Change your language settings to the target language on your computer, email, smartphones and other electronic devices.
- Jeremy Lyon suggested for video game lovers to chat with others in the target language.
- Shahrzad Zahedi who holds a Ph.D. in French Literature and speaks three languages, suggests going to a French restaurant (or Indian, Italian, Japanese...) and ordering the food in the target language. Many restaurants hire waiters from the country where the target language is spoken.

It is easy to continue learning and progressing in a language outside of the classroom even in a country where the target language is not spoken. It does, however, require motivation, dedication and perseverance.

## **Benefits**

### **Job/Career**

Born and raised in France by English-speaking parents was a challenge for me at times but also a blessing. It opened doors for a career I love in a field that I am passionate about. Learning a language can benefit anyone in the workforce—from a writer to a singer who is more “chic” singing in several languages to an office manager who can correspond with other clients worldwide... There exist many career benefits in speaking more than one language.

### **Health**

Speaking several languages challenges the brain. Recent research has proven that speaking and practicing another language can slow-down (for up to five years) and may even prevent Alzheimers. “Recent brain research shows that bilingual people’s brains function better” according to *My Health News Daily*. The article adds: “Research suggests that these benefits of bilingualism apply not only to those who are raised from birth speaking a second language, but also to people who take up a foreign tongue later in life.”

### **Traveling**

A final and obvious benefit to learning and maintaining another language is traveling. French, for example, is not only one of the most spoken languages in the world but is also spoken as a second language in many countries. It opens many doors when traveling.

## **Conclusion**

Maintaining a language, especially when living in a country that speaks a different language, can be challenging—especially if it is not used regularly. However, it is possible to not only maintain a language but also to progress in it. Using methods listed in this article will help you achieve those goals.

## **Resources & Tools**

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## **About The Writer**

Rachele DeMeo was born in Nimes (Languedoc-Roussillon), Southern France where she spent the first nineteen years of her life, graduating with a French Baccalaureate (majoring in Literature and Languages). Raised by an American-Italian father and a British mother, Rachele grew up in a bilingual environment. After a year of studying in a private College in Southern France, she moved to Maryland to complete a B.A. in Christian Education, intern for a Congressman and teach. In 2004, she moved to California for a teaching position and furthered her education graduating with a M.A. Additionally she pursued a (second) Masters in Education specializing in Teaching and Learning. Rachele is also AFAA certified as a group fitness instructor. Over the last 14+ years, she’s had experience teaching K-2, 6-12 and College. She specializes in teaching predominantly French (all levels) but has also taught Italian (beginners) and English (as a Second Language). She currently teaches French at MiraCosta College and Palomar College. She is also on the executive board of the American Association of Teachers of French (San Diego Chapter), as secretary. Rachele is married, has two children she is raising to be multilingual and four pets.