Improve Your Language Skills With a Language Tutor

Developed for Volunteers by the Peace Corps Office of Overseas Programming and Training Support (OPATS) Language Team

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Contents

Why Use a Language Tutor?

Volunteers worldwide have found that the key to really getting to know people, to understand what is going on at your host institution, and to integrate into your community is through being able to speak the local language. During PST you learned basic survival language, and perhaps a bit more. But that's not enough. Now that you're at site, you will want to either learn your PST language more deeply, or you may find that you need to learn a different dialect, or even a totally different language than the one you studied at PST.

The Peace Corps emphasizes the importance—and necessity—of language learning throughout service and encourages all Volunteers to become independent language learners once they leave PST. Many Peace Corps posts offer Skype or telephone tutoring on a regular basis, in which case you may want to look for a language informant to supplement those lessons. Other Peace Corps posts may have funds for you to work with a tutor at site and have a system for reimbursing your payments to language tutors at your site. You may also receive a training session on how to select and work with tutors and language informants.

For best results:

- Find and begin working with a tutor as soon as possible after moving into your community.
- Make this "tutor time" a part of your routine. Meet regularly in a location you both can agree on.
- At the end of each session, agree on the details for the next lesson, so both you and the tutor can prepare properly.
- Identify additional potential language informants (native speakers who can answer your questions about the language and help you practice informally).

The Ongoing Language Learning Manual, available in PDF and e-book formats on PCLive, offers many useful tips.

Top 10 Reasons for Working With a Language Tutor

10   A dictionary is isn't as interesting as a human.

9   A dictionary can't talk with you.

8   A dictionary won't correct your pronunciation and grammar.

7   We need listening practice. Real people don't speak slowly and clearly, the way the teachers in PST did. A tutor can tune into your needs.

6   It's a way to connect with the locals. We risk being drawn to PCVs and other people who can speak English.

5   To experience your host country and its people fully (isn't that why you're here?), you need to speak their language well.

4   Think of the stress/confusion/paranoia you feel when sitting in a group listening to a conversation, and suddenly everybody else laughs and then looks at you to see if you understand. With practice, you can get it!

3   Tutoring gives your life structure especially in the slow periods when there is "Nothing Much To Do."

2   Apps can be fun but don't help you understand language in context

1   Tutoring might be free. Ask if your Peace Corps post pays for it.

Contributing posts: Jordan, Albania, Philippines

Selecting a Language Tutor

Take time to decide on a tutor.
Don't feel that you must choose your tutor immediately after arriving at your site. Although you do want to resume your language study as soon as possible, you should take time to get settled in, meet some people (potential language tutors!), and then choose a tutor. To meet potential tutors (or language informants), start by just hanging out with native speakers at your site, and see who is ready to help you when you need language assistance.

Don't let someone else choose your tutor for you.
Ask for recommendations from a variety of sources. Ask your Peace Corps language and cross-cultural coordinator (LCC), your counterpart, or your host family and colleagues at your site. But while you might ask others to suggest someone, you have the final say-so. Choose a person with whom you can get along and with whom you can work comfortably.

Note: At some posts, your initial tutor may have already been chosen for you, and it is also possible that this tutor has attended a Peace Corps tutor workshop. Meeting with this tutor—for the first few weeks at least—will be very helpful as you transition from PST to your site. You can decide later if you want to change tutors.

A good language tutor doesn't have to speak English.
In fact, it can be an advantage if your tutor *doesn't* speak English. You already speak English. Why have small talk or listen to explanations in English when you can be negotiating for meaning in the local language? As you probably remember from PST, you don't have to understand every word to get the basic idea. Your tutor will quickly learn to adapt his or her speech to your level. You may need to ask your LCC or your counterpart to make the first contact and set up the procedures and guidelines.

A good language tutor does not have to be a trained language teacher.
Your language tutor can be any member of your local community who is willing to spend time and help you with your language learning needs. Your tutor does not need to be a trained teacher. It's more important to find someone reliable who you are comfortable with. This guidance contains ideas on how you can help your tutor best meet your language learning needs. If you want to focus on grammar explanations, however, you might want to look for a trained language teacher, or someone who has at least studied the grammar of the language.

Look for someone who really listens to what you are saying or trying to say.

Look for a language role model.
While it's great to learn from children, students, and casual acquaintances, try to choose a tutor who can speak (and teach) the language the way you want to speak it. If you want to be a respected professional at your work site, for example, choose a tutor who can model and practice that level of the language.

Look for someone who is flexible.
Since you will be the one in charge of what happens in your tutoring sessions, you will want a tutor who can plan a lesson according to your criteria and adapt those lessons to your ever-changing language learning goals.

Ask for a meeting before committing.
The initial meeting with your prospective tutor should enable you to determine whether the two of you will be able to work effectively together. You can use this meeting to:
- identify resources;
- identify a structure for tutoring sessions;
- agree on the logistics: how often, when, where, and for how long will you meet;
- agree on how the tutor will be paid; and
- after discussing the above points with your prospective tutor, agree on a short-term commitment for a limited period of time (perhaps two weeks or one month, for example) before you decide to hire the tutor on a long-term basis. Agree on a topic, format, and other details for the first lesson. This step will give you an idea about the knowledge, skills, readiness, and seriousness of the tutor. If the first lesson doesn't work out, give the tutor some constructive feedback, and see how the second lesson goes.

Consider your personal preferences
- Gender: It is usually less complicated if you have a tutor of the same sex as you.
- Age: The tutor should be old enough to know the language well, and young enough to be receptive to the ideas of a younger PCV.
- Private or shared class: If you study solo, you know the session will always meet your needs if you have a good plan. However, studying with a partner can increase motivation.
- Community standing: The tutor should be someone respected and known by your community because this relationship could either reflect positively or negatively on you.

Qualities of a Good Language Tutor

Although your needs may vary from those of other PCVs, there are a number of qualities that are generally important for an effective language tutor.

Knowledge
- Speaks the language like a native.
- Understands about the role of the Peace Corps Volunteer in the community and PC goals in general.
- Understands the grammar of his or her language or, if not, understands the grammar of English or another language.
- Understands the local culture.

Skills
- Knows how to simplify the language so that the learner can understand.
- Makes the PCV feel comfortable.

- Has some "natural" teaching skills.
- Corrects important mistakes but not all mistakes.
- Gives the right amount of new information (not too much or too little).
- Optional: Speaks at least a little English or another language that the PCV knows.

Attitudes
- Willing to follow PCV's directions.
- Reliable (shows up as arranged).
- Takes teaching seriously.
- Mature, sober, responsible, etc.

Potential Challenges

PCVs face many challenges working with tutors and the items listed below are just a few common examples.

Experience: If you are lucky, you may be able to find a language tutor who is a trained language instructor who has experience providing individual tutoring to other PCVs. More commonly, you will work with tutors who have some teaching or language teaching experience, but may not have taught their own language to adults. At some sites, your choices may be limited to untrained community members who are available.

Style: Even if tutors are experienced, trained language teachers, they often have old-fashioned ideas about language learning and teaching. The tutor may correct every mistake and explain why it was wrong, or ask the Volunteer to memorize verb tables or vocabulary lists or translate newspaper articles.

Focus: It can be difficult for you to keep the tutoring session focused on language learning.

Money: Because the tutor member will be paid, choosing a tutor can be delicate in some communities. It can also be difficult to stop working with a tutor, or to change to a different tutor.

Feedback: PCVs sometimes find it difficult to give feedback to tutors on tutoring style or topics, especially if they are senior community members.

Relationship: PCVs should maintain a professional relationship with their tutors as it is hard in some post cultures to draw a line between being a proficient tutor and being a friend who just sometimes shows up without being prepared for the lesson.

Be sure to consult your language team at post for individual guidance on selecting and working with tutors.

Setting Language Learning Goals

Make a plan: What communicative tasks do you want to be able to perform on the job or in the community?

1. Go over the language materials from PST with your language and cross-cultural facilitator (LCF) and make a list of things you still need to work on. Set deadlines for yourself. Make a list of the communicative tasks you can already do.

    Some examples of communicative tasks are:

    - Ask and answer questions about the weather.
    - Give and follow instructions for simple procedures, including food preparation.
    - Act appropriately with a seller when the product bought is not in good condition or is not what you were looking for.

2. Make "Can-Do" statements from your list of communicative tasks and use them as benchmarks. For example:
    - Communicative competency as identified in the curriculum: *Act appropriately as a guest.*
    - Corresponding "Can-Do" statement: *I can act appropriately as a guest.*
    - Suggested rubrics for "Can-Do" statements:
        - *Can do it well*
        - *Can do it with some difficulty*
        - *Can do it with much difficulty*
    - You can find examples of <u>ACTFL "Can-Do"' statements</u> online.

3. Make a plan on how to do the communicative tasks better, i.e., learn how to say more about things you can already talk about. See if you can move the checkmarks from *can do it with difficulty* to *can do it well*.

4. Re-evaluate your plan on a regular basis. After you have been at your site for a while, you will notice that many of your communicative goals may have changed. Work on your own or with your tutor to update your list. For example, you may want to be able to:
    - Act appropriately as a host or hostess.
    - Ask and answer questions about intercultural differences.
    - Share information and ask and answer questions to organize a meeting.

See the chart in Appendix A as a guide to remind yourself what you are able to do at each Language Proficiency Interview (LPI) level.

Working With Your Tutor

Now that you have a tutor, remember that *you* are in charge of the sessions.

Setting Up Guidelines and Structures

- Review your expectations and set goals for your language learning. Discuss on a regular basis what your language learning goals are, and how you want your tutor to help you to achieve these goals.

- Give regular feedback. If your tutor corrects you every time you make a mistake, for example, and this is not what you prefer, let him or her know.

- Repeat as often as necessary the two points listed just above. Get your tutor to acquire these as habits, so that your work together can be most beneficial for you! If necessary, give your tutor examples of how you want your lessons conducted (see Appendix B) or of activities you find useful (see Appendix C).

- You do not have to keep the first tutor you find if you find that she or he is not meeting your language learning needs. It doesn't hurt to give the tutor a second chance, but if you ask for role-play and practice, and your tutor only gives you grammar exercises, you need to redefine the tutor's responsibilities or find a new tutor.

- You do not have to work with your tutor in a formal classroom-type setting. Go out for a walk, have a soda, go to the bazaar and improve your shopping proficiency, or bring him or her to work.

- Get into the habit of meeting with your tutor regularly.

- At the end of each tutoring session, agree upon the details for the next lesson so that both you and the tutor can prepare properly.

- Work with the tutor to establish a structure for the sessions, and leave it flexible for last-minute changes and additions. You may want to start every lesson with questions about expressions you heard during the week, for example, and then move into a review of the previous lesson and a grammar drill. Or you may want to start with vocabulary and then write and practice a dialog or role-play that you can use in a real-life situation. See Appendix B for a suggested framework for a tutoring session which you may find useful.

- Although formal study of grammar may be important to you, don't let this constitute the entire content of your language study. Remember that the purpose of language is communication.

- Be sure to regularly review things which you have been exposed to in the past. Every new lesson does not necessarily have to be a time for learning new material.

- See Appendix D for suggested topics for tutoring sessions.

Working With Language Informants

In addition to a language tutor who you will pay for professional services, you will also find it helpful to identify several language informants to whom you can ask questions about language. Almost anybody in the community can be a language informant: a homestay family member, a neighbor, a counterpart, a shopkeeper, a friend, neighborhood children, sports teammates, co-workers, or students. All of these people can provide useful opportunities for practicing what you have learned and for learning new language.

Although they use the language perfectly, most native speakers have usually not thought deeply about the grammar or pronunciation of the language they speak, or why one way of saying something is better than another in a particular situation. As a result, they are usually not able to give clear explanations, or "teach." This does not mean that community members aren't valuable resources, but that they have limitations. However, every community member is a potential language informant you can use daily to access valuable information about the language you are learning. PCVs who use local community members to improve their local language skills, and who integrate into their local communities, can usually speak quickly and feel more comfortable with the local language.

Community members are usually very happy to teach PCVs new words or expressions. For example, when you go shopping, you can ask the names of unknown foods or products. When you talk to counterparts, you can ask for feedback on how politely you said something. When you spend time with host families or neighbors, you can ask questions about how to express particular ideas. In addition, it is often possible to persuade friends in the community to practice a dialog or give feedback on a short speech. Most community members enjoy being asked language questions and are supportive of language learning, but it is important not to overwhelm them with too many questions.

Neighborhood children can be great language informants if you want to interact at an uncomplicated level! If you want to work with someone who will be willing to answer hundreds of "What's this?" or "What are you doing?" questions without getting annoyed, or if you want someone who will not pick apart your grammar or correct your every mistake, then spending time with children can be great.

Speaking regularly with shop clerks, sports teammates, and office or school employees can give you many opportunities to practice and get very comfortable with formulaic expressions (greetings, shopping) and simple small talk. You can practice "on the run" and won't feel obligated to stop for a long conversation. You can slowly, over time, introduce or become involved in longer conversations as your language proficiency increases.

You can also listen to stories, songs, proverbs, etc., from your informants, and write them down if possible. You can then take these to your tutor for more explanation.

Examples of possible questions you can ask language informants include:

- What's this called?
- How do you spell …?

- Was that the correct way to say that?
- How do you say …?
- Which is the better word in this situation? … or …?
- Can you say that again please so that I can understand the pronunciation?
- Is that the correct way to speak to an older person?
- Is it better to say it this way? Or that way?
- Why do you say … in this situation?
- Which is more polite?
- Should I speak first or wait until the village chief has spoken?
- What is another way to say …?
- When should I say …?

Appendix A: Language Proficiency at the Four Main Language Proficiency Interview (LPI) Levels

Use this chart as a guide to remind yourself what you are able to do at each level. It would also be useful to set your goals by using the ACTFL guidelines to make can-do statements.

Novice
- Speak in single words or short phrases
- Talk about the most common aspects of daily life (survival topics)
- Speak in informal situations only

Intermediate
- Speak in sentences
- Maintain a simple conversation
- Ask and answer basic questions
- Speak in present tense only
- Carry out simple transactions (e.g., shopping)
- Speak in informal situations only

Advanced
- Speak in paragraphs
- Use past or future tense
- Tell a story
- Describe something in detail
- Handle a complicated situation (e.g., something in your house breaks and you need to get it fixed)
- Speak in informal situations and workplace situations
- Speak about concrete topics (e.g., what you did last weekend)

Superior
- Speak in multiple, connected paragraphs
- Speak about abstract topics (e.g., freedom)
- Speak in formal situations
- Defend an opinion
- Convince or persuade others
- Talk about a hypothetical topic (e.g., how society would be changed if all girls were educated)
- Give advice

Appendix B: Framework for Communication-Focused Tutoring Sessions or Language Lessons

Stage	Procedure	Examples	Purpose & Rationale	Notes
Introduction & lead-in (5 minutes)	• Introduce and clarify the topic or task	• Task 1: The PCV has decided that s/he wants to be better at negotiating the times of meetings with his/her counterpart. • Task 2: The PCV has decided that s/he wants to be better at helping his/her host family cook dinner.	• Clarifying exactly what communicative task the PCV needs help with helps to keep the tutoring session focused. • Clarifying the context in which the interaction takes place will determine degrees of formality, type of vocabulary.	• The topic or task should be something that the PCV needs help with. • Ideally the PCV should decide the focus of the tutoring session.
Preparation (15 minutes or more)	• Tutor asks PCV what cultural knowledge s/he has about this topic/task. • PCV writes down useful vocabulary and phrases and then tells tutor. • Tutor corrects minimally if necessary.	• For Task 1 above, the cultural knowledge might involve concepts of time, avoiding saying "no" to a suggestion in order to save face. • For Task 2 above, the cultural knowledge might involve gender roles in the house, things you should/shouldn't do with food, etc. • The vocabulary for both tasks should be a fairly complete list of what the PCV **already knows.**	• Asking the PCV to remember relevant vocabulary and grammar will strengthen her/his future recall. • Finding out what the PCV already knows will enable the tutor to assess where s/he needs help.	• Tutor should add to the PCV's cultural knowledge if s/he is missing key information. • Tutor should avoid teaching new grammar, vocabulary, or phrases unless the PCV does not have the minimum to achieve the communicative goal. The point of the approach is to help the PCV to clarify and use all that s/he already knows to perform a communicative task outside the tutoring session. • Communication is the goal, not perfection—and thus the tutor should avoid correction unless the PCV is incomprehensible.

Simulation 1 (15 minutes or more)	• PCV and tutor role-play the interaction. If the PCV has a digital recorder, it's useful to record the conversation. • PCV and tutor can switch roles. • Tutor makes notes of problems to discuss later, especially those that seriously affect communication. • Tutor should not correct during the role-play.	• It's important that the communicative task is clearly identified in advance. For Task 1, the PCV and tutor should role-play negotiating the time of a particular meeting. For Task 2, the PCV should role-play offering to help his/her host family cook dinner.	• Allowing the PCV to practice the real-world interaction will help him/her to experiment and try out ideas in a safe environment.	• The PCV needs support and encouragement in communicating at the limits of his/her knowledge and ability. Allowing the PCV to experiment will support his/her communicative competency more than correcting each mistake. • Switching roles will allow the PCV to hear how a native speaker performs the task. • Making a note of important problem areas to be addressed will help the tutor to focus on these. • Avoiding correction during the role-play will be more encouraging for the PCV and give the tutor a better opportunity to evaluate the PCV's ability to perform the communicative task without interruption. It's possible to make a lot of linguistic mistakes and still be very effective in performing a communicative task. Tutors should be more concerned with helping the PCV to perform communicative tasks than helping the PCV to speak without errors.

Stage	Procedure	Examples	Purpose & Rationale	Notes
Refinement (15 minutes or more)	• Tutor asks PCV if s/he noticed anything that could be improved or has questions. If the conversation was recorded, the PCV should listen and try to identify these errors before the tutor does. • Tutor may point out additional areas for improvement or may ask PCV to self-correct pronunciation, word choice, or grammar. • Tutor may also add cultural information that would influence the choice of expression.	• The PCV may be unsure of the pronunciation or a particular word, or have noticed that s/he used the past form of the verb when the present form would have been better. • The tutor may have noticed that the PCV is too formal and will ask him/her how s/he could say things less formally.	• Giving the PCV a chance to correct or refine her/his own production supports the learner in becoming more independent and ensures that the area of lesson focus are within his/her developmental range (i.e., within her/his [Zone of Proximal Development](#)).	• It's important here to stay focused. Once again, the goal is communication, not perfection or error-free speech. • Tutor should avoid adding new material that is not necessary to the communicative task at hand. • Tutor should ask the PCV if s/he knows the correct word, expression, or grammar item before telling him/her. This will strengthen the PCV's recall as well as give the opportunity to the tutor to provide feedback on what the PCV already knows.

Stage	Procedure	Examples	Purpose & Rationale	Notes
Simulation 2 (15 minutes or more)	• PCV and tutor role-play the interaction again. As in the previous role-play, the tutor does not correct during the role-play. Ideally, most of the major challenges to communication have been addressed during the refinement stage.	• It's best if the role-play is a repeat of the first time. This will allow the PCV to improve those areas that have been discussed.	• Giving the PCV a second opportunity to practice the real-world interaction will let him/her improve on previous performance.	• The PCV needs support and encouragement in communicating at the limits of her/his knowledge and ability. Letting him/her experiment will support communicative competency more than correcting every little mistake.
Field application (Time: as appropriate)	• PCV practices the communicative task in a real-world context, ideally more than once. It may be useful for the PCV to take notes immediately afterward on what goes well or less well, or on any questions they have about language.	• If the communicative task is negotiating the time of a meeting with his/her counterpart, then for the field application, the PCV should do this for real. • If the communicative task is helping the host family cook dinner, then that's what s/he should do.	• All the previous stages should have prepared the PCV for this.	• It is not appropriate and may not be possible for the tutor to accompany the PCV at this stage. The PCV needs to do the task unassisted, focusing only on getting the message across or achieving the goal of the interaction. The most appropriate form of feedback will be the response the PCV gets from his/her conversation partner.

Stage	Procedure	Examples	Purpose & Rationale	Notes
Debriefing (15-20 minutes)	• At the next meeting, the PCV and tutor discuss the success of the interaction and may address aspects of language or culture.		• Giving the PCV the opportunity to discuss the interaction and ask any remaining questions is a useful way to bring the task cycle to a close.	• It is important to focus primarily on the areas that the PCV considers relevant. S/he is the best judge of what s/he wants to learn, is ready to learn, and what is relevant. • The debriefing session may take place at the beginning of the next tutoring session.

Appendix C: Suggestions for Tutoring Activities

These activity suggestions are from returned Peace Corps Volunteers:

- Identify communicative tasks that you will have to perform as part of your work and prepare for them with your tutor by listing relevant vocabulary, writing and practicing dialogs, and role-playing situations.

- Practice talking about your background (what you did before you came here, what were your duties,) your current work as a Peace Corps Volunteer, your plans for the future, and your hobbies and interests.

- Review the exercises from your PST language book and practice each topic with your tutor.

- Ask your tutor to come with you to meetings, trips to the market, etc. Ask your tutor to help you prepare by teaching you vocabulary, expressions or grammar. Alternatively, ask your tutor to take notes on your language skills and work together later to improve any problem areas.

- Talk about the work you are doing in your community. The tutor may be able to get involved in your community project. Some tutors have actually become counterparts.

- Use your notes or a language journal to help organize the content and the form of your tutor sessions.

- Role-play and ask questions that come up.

- Do structured grammar drills in class.

- Read a short text together and discuss the content and the new vocabulary, expressions or grammar.

- Record your lessons so you can play them back at home.

- Read and translate simple children's stories from English to the local language. Children's stories often repeat phrases in different tenses and pronouns so you will be forced to use all the tenses often.
    - Ask the tutor to explain the grammar and give you more examples.
    - Ask the tutor to suggest suitable translations of expressions in the story.
    - Practice reading the translated story to the tutor in preparation for reading it to neighborhood children.

- Write down new words, phrases, and expressions as you hear them, and ask your tutor about them.

- Write sentences and dialogs using vocabulary from Peace Corps glossaries or other word lists.

- Use an elementary school language book and write out answers to the exercises for the tutor to correct.
.
- Use your tutor to help you develop bilingual teaching materials, if applicable.

Appendix D: Suggested Topics for Tutoring Sessions

If you don't have immediate access to your post's communicative task-based core language curriculum, these are some of the topics that you could think about working further on.
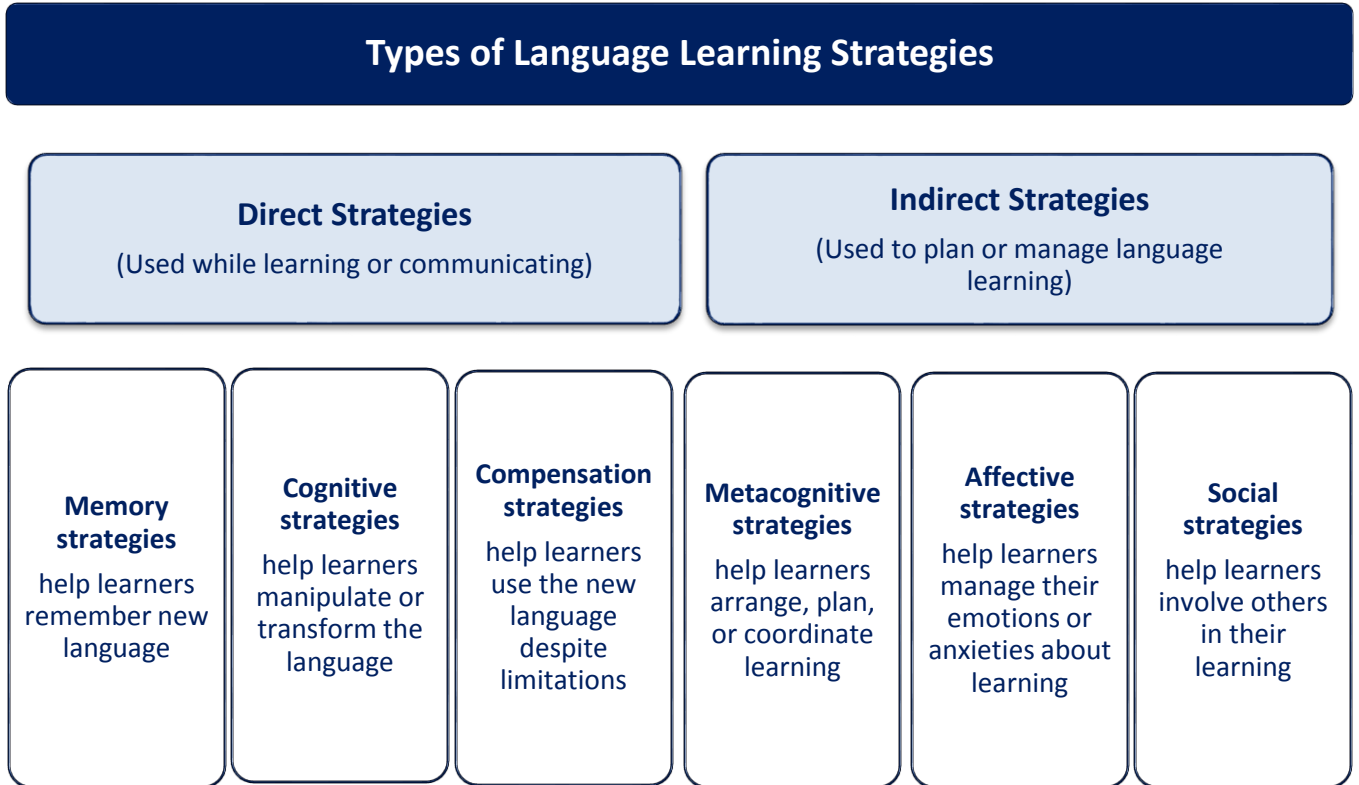
1. Safety and security
2. Peace Corps work
3. Apologize
4. Explain your absence from class or work
5. Describe your educational and professional background
6. Ask and answer questions about functions of objects
7. Use culturally appropriate nonverbal communication
8. Describe the physical appearance of yourself and others
9. Describe personalities of yourself and others
10. Ask and answer questions about professions and ages of yourself and others
11. Ask about host country national dishes
12. Ask and refuse permission
13. Give and follow instructions for simple procedures
14. Describe rules of a game
15. Give instructions for activities in the camps (if you organize camps)
16. Describe dietary needs
17. Act appropriately as a guest
18. Make and cancel appointments
19. Ask and answer questions about housing
20. Ask and answer questions about future plans
21. Report a sequence of past events
22. Ask about and give street addresses
23. Ask for and give directions on the phone without visuals
24. Answer questions about or show your ID documents
25. Name and request money denominations
26. Identify and ask about weight and size
27. Identify and ask about household items
28. Act appropriately as a host/hostess
29. Name and describe the holidays
30. Express approval and disapproval in culturally appropriate ways
31. Offer congratulations and sympathies
32. Give, accept, and decline invitations
33. Request, understand, and clarify health guidance
34. Ask about availability and location of medical and personal hygiene items
35. Understand and give warnings based on weather emergencies and natural disasters
36. Describe Peace Corps mission, goals, and projects in country
37. Identify and discuss cultural differences
38. Identify and compare gender roles

39. Explain Peace Corps rules and policies
40. Give instructions for complex procedures
41. Request emergency police, fire, or medical assistance
42. Ask for secure storage of belongings at work
43. Intervene appropriately according to bystander intervention training
44. Express dissatisfaction with someone's behavior
45. Deal with drunks in a variety of contexts: at a party, in the street, at the market, etc.

Appendix E: Types of Language Learning Strategies

The descriptions of language learning strategies on the following pages are organized into these categories.

Types of Language Learning Strategies

Direct Strategies
(Used while learning or communicating)

Indirect Strategies
(Used to plan or manage language learning)

Memory strategies	Cognitive strategies	Compensation strategies	Metacognitive strategies	Affective strategies	Social strategies
help learners remember new language	help learners manipulate or transform the language	help learners use the new language despite limitations	help learners arrange, plan, or coordinate learning	help learners manage their emotions or anxieties about learning	help learners involve others in their learning

Source: Oxford, R. (1990*). Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

For more information about language learning strategies, the following are excellent resources:

- CAL Digest: Language Learning Strategies
- Oxford, R. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle. Andrew Cohen and Susan Weaver (1990).
- *Styles- and Strategies-Based Instruction: A Teachers Guide.* Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA), University of Minnesota.

DIRECT LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

### Memory Strategies

Create mental linkages

1. **Grouping:** Group words according to topic (e.g., weather), category (e.g., fruit, vegetables), opposites (e.g., friendly/unfriendly), or parts of speech (e.g. nouns, verbs).
2. **Connect words that go together:** List words with other words that go with them (e.g., take a bus, take a bath, take a break).
3. **Place new words in context:** Write new words in sentences rather than alone, or write out conversations using new words or grammar before you expect to have the conversation.
4. **Labeling:** Draw pictures of objects or situations and label them, or label objects at home or work.
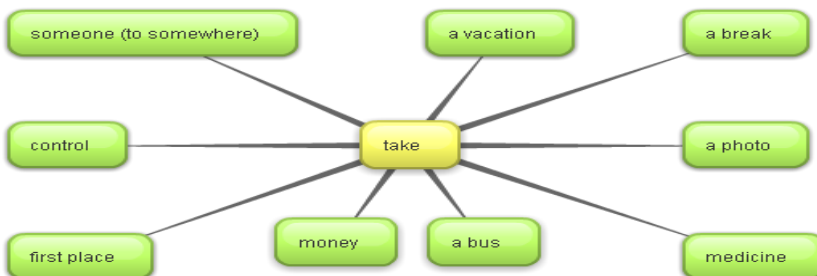
Apply images and sounds

5. **Use semantic mappin**g: Make a semantic map (also called spidergrams, mindmaps, and wordwebs) to show how words related to a particular situation are connected to each other.

Examples of Semantic Mapping

Restaurant Vocabulary Mindmap
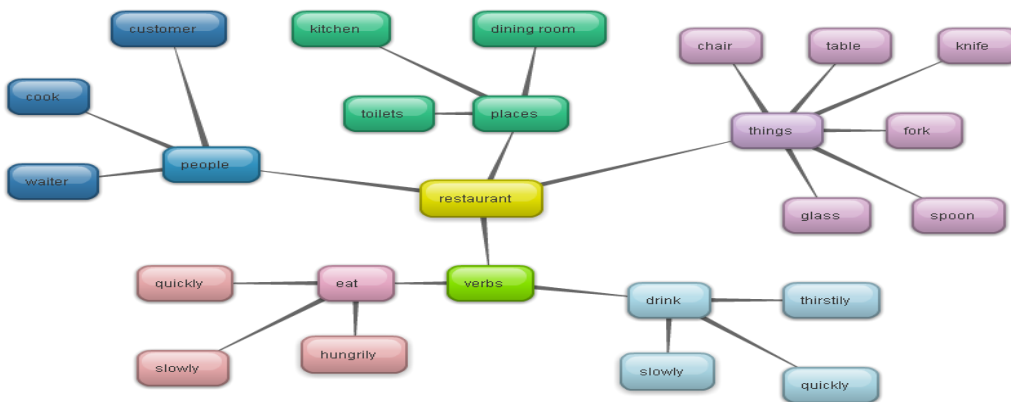
"Take" Collocation Mindmap

6. **Use keywords**: Use the sound of a word to make a mental image to help you remember the meaning (e.g., "dom" is Russian for "house," so I make a mental image of a house with a dome on top).
7. **Represent sounds in memory:** Associate the sound of the new word with the sound of a word that is familiar to you (e.g., "brat" is the Russian word for brother, and my brother is a brat: an ill-mannered annoying child).

Review well

8. **Structured reviewing**: Review vocabulary or other language areas at carefully spaced intervals: 10 minutes, one hour, one day, two days, one week, one month, etc.

Use action

9. **Act it out:** Practice new language by miming it and saying it to yourself at the same time (e.g., mime opening the door or eating).
10. **Physically move or reorganize:** Move or reorganize things to remember new information. For example: Write new words on cards and move them from one pile to another as you learn them. Write verbs on cards and put make two piles according to the verb type. Or organize different types of language items in separate notebook sections.

Cognitive Strategies

Practice

11. **Repeat it:** Say or do something again and again. Repeat new vocabulary, expressions, or sentences, either mentally, out loud, or in writing.
12. **Practice sounds or the writing system:** Copy or imitate spoken sounds, words, or phrases, focusing on word or sentence stress, the rhythm and intonation of the language, or pausing. Copy or imitate written letters, words, or phrases.
13. **Recognize patterns:** Notice and imitate how and when native speakers use routine expressions (e.g., notice and imitate how native speakers use expressions such as "How are you?" or "It's time to eat/go/get ready").
14. **Use your natural surroundings:** Practice new language in realistic settings whenever you can. Start conversations on the bus, at the market, in the street, or outside your house. Listen to the radio or TV while you're at home. Read product labels, children's books, and newspapers.

Receive and send messages efficiently

15. **Try to get ideas quickly:** Listen or read quickly to find key words or expressions that give the main idea such as a listening carefully to the first and last sentences in any discussion, looking first at the newspaper headline (skimming). Or listen or read quickly to find specific information such as tomorrow's temperature, a bus departure time, or the final score in a soccer match (scanning).

Analyze

16. **Analyze deductively:** Use general rules and apply them to new target language situations. For example, if adding –ed to a verb such as "work" makes the past tense, then I will try adding –ed to all verbs to form the past tense.
17. **Analyze expressions:** Figure out the meaning of a new word or expression by breaking it down into parts you can identify (e.g., un-drink-able: un = negative, able = ability).
18. **Translate:** Plan what you want to say in English then translate it into the local language.
19. **Transfer:** Apply your knowledge of words, concepts, or structures to the new language (e.g., recognize *telephone* means *telefon*).

Create structure for input and output

20. **Take notes:** Write down the main idea or specific points (e.g., take notes during a community meeting).
21. **Highlight:** Use a variety of emphasis techniques: underline, star, or color-code to focus your attention on important aspects of your language learning notes.

Compensation Strategies

Guess intelligently

22. **Use linguistic clues:** Use context to figure out the meaning of what is heard or read. For example, if you hear two people greet each other and say, "Long time no see," they will probably then talk about when they last saw each other and what they're doing now.
23. **Use other clues:** Use the speakers' tone of voice, body language, or gestures as clues to the meaning of what is being said.

Overcome limitations

24. **Use English:** If you don't know the word or expression in local language, try saying it in English.
25. **Get help:** If you don't understand something or know how to say or write something, ask your conversational partner*.*
26. **Use mime or gesture:** If you don't know how to say something, try mime or gesture.
27. **Select the topic:** Direct the conversation to one or more topics that you are familiar with and that you have enough vocabulary and grammar to discuss (e.g., ask about your conversation partner's family).
28. **Adjust the message:** Use simpler vocabulary or grammar (e.g., if you don't know the word for "stool," say "chair."
29. **Invent words:** Make up new words or guess if you don't know the correct terms. For example, if you don't know the word for "eyeglasses," say "eye helper."
30. **Say it in other words:** If you don't know a word or expression, use circumlocution. For example, if you don't know the word for pen, say, "the thing you write with," or mime writing.

INDIRECT LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Metacognitive Strategies

Center your learning

31. **Link known material:** View a key concept, principle, or set of materials in relation to an upcoming language task or activity and associate it with what you already know. For example, before buying a train ticket, list train travel vocabulary, question forms, and money vocabulary.
32. **Delay speaking to focus on listening:** Focus primarily on listening until your language skills are better. For example, the first time you go to a community meeting, plan to sit quietly and listen to the conversation rather than participating.

Arrange and plan your learning

33. **Learn about language learning theory:** Find out more about how language learning works and then use this information to improve your own language learning.
34. **Organize:** Organize your schedule, physical environment, and language learning resources so that they best suit your needs.
35. **Set goals and objectives:** Either on your own or in collaboration with others, set language learning targets.
36. **Plan for a language task:** Analyze a language task to identify what you need to do and what you already know—to find out what you need to know. For example, if you have to make a presentation, think about what you need to say, and from there identify what you don't already know and need to learn.

Evaluate your learning

37. **Self-monitor:** Identify errors in understanding or producing the new language either while or after you are communicating.
38. **Self-evaluate:** Evaluate your progress in the new language in relation to targets or goals. Use semantic maps to review the meaning of new vocabulary items and to connect them mentally to other similar items both in your first and the new languages.

Affective Strategies

39. **Be positive:** Encourage yourself by writing or saying positive statements to yourself in order to feel more confident about using the new language.
40. **Reward yourself:** Give yourself a reward for doing something new or difficult in the new language, or for completing a unit of study.

Social Strategies

Ask questions

41. **Ask for clarification or verification:** Ask the speaker to repeat, explain, summarize, slow down, or give examples.
42. **Ask for correction:** Ask your conversational partner to correct you.

Cooperate with others

43. **Work with other language learners:** Improve your language skills by practicing with other learners (e.g., meet once a week to role-play situations).

44. **Work with native speakers:** Work with native speakers or other proficient speakers (e.g., ask community members what street signs or product labels mean).

Empathize with others

45. **Develop cultural understanding**: Learn more about the culture in order to understand why people communicate in a particular way. For example, notice who speaks first in a group – the youngest or the oldest person.