

Tips for Language Learners

Some people talk about a “language barrier” that has to be overcome. I prefer referring to it as a “language bridge”, knowing that the time of language acquisition can bring you closer to the people whose language you are learning. Any native speaker will do better at it than you. This simple fact will raise his/her status and self-esteem, and if you can live with the idea of having your status lowered for a while, you’ll be in for a lot of fun. Of course, if your feeling of self-worth is based on your performance, you’ll find it hard to see your language reduced to that of a baby. In that case quickly look for other ways to build your self-esteem. If your self worth is more or less solid, you can have as much fun and excitement as a baby exploring the new and wonderful world of a new language and culture.

Go for it!

1. Motivation

The fact that you are reading these lines shows that you are already motivated to study, and probably able to further motivate yourself. But you may have experienced that in the beginning, when you were new in the country and new in the language, your motivation to study was higher than it is now. You may be in a period when you have to re-motivate yourself.

Your global motivation may be an imposed or felt need: Your boss wants you to reach a certain level, or you want to communicate with locals on certain level of relationship. The goal is already part of your initial motivation.

"I want to travel in Morocco without getting ripped of."
 "My boss wants me to be able to negotiate a business deal" "I want to make Moroccan friends" ...

Now, while you pursue your goal, your motivation will change. If your initial motivation is to reach a low level, you may find out that you could attempt more, and your progress motivates you for more. Or the opposite, you may find that your goal is too far away, then you have to break up your initial goal into smaller ones that can be more easily accomplished.

2. Re-Motivation

It is good to "invent" specific points that you can work for. E.g.: "In four weeks a friend will come to visit and I want to impress her/him with my Arabic." Pride is a very good motivation, so ask yourself, how you can best impress your friend. Obviously by helping him buy something. That

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means during that month you will practise your negotiation skills. I.e. you go to the Sunday market and bargain for a few cheap and worthless items. That will cost you 20 Dirhams and the skills learnt will help you bargain for a carpet for your friend, saving him 1000 Dh, which will impress him/her. You can also impress your friend by your ability to ask for directions and information while travelling with her/him. Therefore, you envisage situations you may need and practice him in the month before (s)he comes.

Embarrassment

is also a good motivation. You don't want to look like a dummy in class, so, review your lessons. You don't want to look like a dummy at your friends house, when you're invited, so, practice a few empty small-talk phrases, a bit of complimenting and flattery, a few questions about the family.

Love

is the strongest motivation. You don't have to fall in love with someone, but to have friend who is interested in your progress and rejoices with you is a great motivation.

Or something you love, it may be soccer or philosophy or a word of wisdom or theatre. Use these things as natural motivators and push yourself - and your teachers to help you - talk about soccer, philosophy, art, cooking, or whatever topic it is that is closest to your heart. Did you give up making your spouse compliments in your mother tongue? Well, now is the time to try to say nice things in your new language. (don't forget to add "tbaarak Allah", of course.)

3. Plateaus

Proficiency comes in steps, there are periods when you subjectively feel you are making progress. In these times motivation is no problem. But each of these periods is followed by a period that is often referred to as "plateau-ing". It is when you have the subjective impression of regressing or not making any progress at all. In these periods it is best to motivate yourself for one specific skill, asking the time, asking the way, memorising a dialogue, translating your favourite song or poem and memorising it... This way you stay on target and don't forget, the impression of regressing is merely subjective. In reality your brain is busy consolidating a wealth of new information and getting ready for the next leap forward.

4. Mistakes

Mistakes are great! They prove that you are trying new things. You haven't yet learned to make a fool of yourself and laugh about yourself? Well now is a good time to do so, there will be ample opportunity.

There are different types of mistakes:

Grammatical mistakes:

Schools and teachers like to concentrate on these because they are easy to track and easy to fix. But in reality they are the least important ones, as they rarely hinder communication. If somebody corrects your grammar, politely say to him/her "Thank you", but in your mind say: "It doesn't matter at all."

Vocabulary mistakes.

These are also easy to fix, very frequent, as we mix up letters in a word, or use the wrong word that sounds similar to us, though completely different to them.

These are inevitably, a bit more serious as they affect communication, therefore we have to fix them but be ready, willing and brave enough to make them, lots of them, the more the better. When

corrected, we always say "thank you", perhaps then write the correct word and ask "Is this the right one?" We NEVER say "excuse me", when somebody corrects a mistake, that would give the person the impression that his correction has embarrassed us. Even if we feel embarrassed, we have no reason to be embarrassed and in reality that person has rendered us a valuable service and we want to encourage that.

Cultural mistakes

are the most subtle and serious ones. They are the ones that put us into categories of "Gestapo German" "Imperialist American" "Colonialist French". These mostly have to do with wrong pronunciation or intonation or wrong idiomatic.

Our goal cannot be to sound Moroccan, but it can be to sound "neutral foreign". These mistakes are specific to the languages of origin. I have the impression that it is easiest to identify a German through his/her intonation, i.e. the "melody" of a phrase, an American through their "r's" and the sound as if speaking too much in the back of their mouths, the French through their "h's" and the impression of speaking too much out of the front of their mouths. When somebody guesses your nationality at first try, compliment him and ask back how (s)he knew, ask for specific answers, not just "pronunciation" or "clothes" but try to find out what exactly and fix it. I think the cultural mistakes are the ones that are worth serious work and effort to fix.

If it is a specific letter your mother tongue doesn't pronounce, drill yourself and ask your teacher to drill you relentlessly. Is it intonation, listen for the "melody", try to reproduce the melody with empty words "lo li la lo" then memorize complete phrases in the right melody.

Listen to Moroccans when they speak your language, then "ape" them (when they aren't around). You will normally pick up a strange intonation and be able to practice this "strange" intonation in your language in order to then apply it to your new language, where the "strange" intonation belongs.

3. Community based

For spoken languages there is no alternative to community based learning. Classroom learning is not a substitute but speeds up the process and often cuts down study time to a half or even a third.

4. Go out and practice

Take your lessons to the street. For instance go out and ask five people what time it is, ask five people for the way somewhere, ask in 5 "téléboutiques" to change you money...

5. Shopping

It is good to develop a relationship with one "Hanut", where you go frequently. But once your known there, use others a. Make shopping difficult for yourself. Don't buy a box of "la vache qui rit" but go to five different "Hawanit" and buy two pieces at each. As a student, do it as Moroccans do, and let the "Hanut" keep your stocks. Once you know the language you can revert to more efficient (linguistically less beneficial) ways of doing things.

6. Markets

Don't be shy asking people about things they sell, what the strange plant is used for ... Bargain for a second hand faucet on the Sunday market then give it to another dealer, telling him you don't need it - it won't be worth keeping anyway.

5. Food

Try out different snack places. Have you ever had a yoghurt or a “raibi” at a milk place?

6. Use your language for teaching

Think of things that you enjoy doing and that your friends might want to learn. How do you make “crazy chocolate cake”? How do you set up a little private website? How to design your “carte de visite” Prepare your lessons and ask your teacher for help when you get stuck, then actually do it, in a kitchen, in a Cyber café...

7. Memorisation

Despite all sorts of new methods of language learning on the market, memorisation of vocabulary is still a big task.

Memory can be trained, and any sort of memorization will help you to memorize vocabulary also. Memorizing a poem or song in your mother tongue will not "overload" your memory so that there will be no more room for new words. On the contrary it will make memorisation easier. Food can also help the brain. the philosopher E.E. Wildersmith recommended grapefruit, others recommend fish, everybody seems to agree that veggies are better than meat. Even if this is not a tract on nutrition but Morocco has such a big variety of veggies and fruit - many more than types of meat - and those greeneries are therefore a plentiful source of words that you can memorize while chewing.

Most people find adverbs and adjectives harder to remember than nouns, and verbs hardest of all.

Nouns

It is best to memorise nouns in families or groups that belong together: If you learn door, also learn window, clothes from top to bottom etc.

Adjectives

Adjectives and adverbs can often be grouped with their opposites or in groups of increasing strength:

downcast ← sad ← **contented (la bas)** → happy → rejoicing
tiny ← small ← **regular** → big → huge ...

Verbs

Verbs are best learned together with nouns you already know in a complete phrase. It doesn't make sense to learn all the verbs that could go with fish when you learn the noun fish - because in the beginning you may only want to buy or eat one. But when you learn the verb “catch” learn it together with the known noun “fish”: “I've never caught a fish in the Oued Fes”.

8. Vocabulary cards

The biggest challenge in Arabic is memory. Vocabulary cards are a more versatile way to manage your vocabulary than lists. I suggest to organize your cards in three categories:

- **New**
- **In process of acquisition (the active pile)**
- **Known (the passive pile).**

If you're in full time language study you should try for 15 new words every day, 5 days a week. In addition to those 15 words you can review the cards of your active pile, which shouldn't get much bigger than about 100 cards. On Saturday, when you don't learn new words, go through your active

pile and put those words you know into the passive pile. Review as many words as you can from your passive pile and put the ones you don't know back into the active pile.

Take cards with you when you're out, waiting for something, standing in line somewhere or sit in a Café.

People tend to be nosy and want to know what you're doing and normally wouldn't mind asking you your words for a time. Don't give them too many cards, and give them only cards from your active and passive pile, not from the new cards.

While it is good to push yourself, attempting goals that are out of reach is counterproductive. There is nothing magical about the number 15, and there is no reason why you should try to memorise 15 words a day during the entire period of your language acquisition. If you expect visitors or other activities in a given week, set your target to 5 or 2 new words a day. Never try to catch up on missed days afterwards. If you can't learn your 15 words one day, don't try to learn 30 the next. If you regularly can't reach your target, lower it. In language study there is more value in a slower Marathon approach than in fast sprints.

9. Make your own dictionary

At the same time as you start learning new words, record them in an indexed notebook in alphabetical order. I recommend two separate ones: from your language to Arabic and the second one from Arabic to your language. For beginners the first one will be more useful. You can also record an English entry in it for which you want to go hunting for an Arabic equivalent.

In all vocabulary tools, cards and notebooks, always record singular and plural for nouns, present tense vowel for verbs and prepositions it can be constructed with. In the Arabic to mother tongue notebook, leave room after each entry. You will learn different meanings and other ways to construct the verb in a sentence later on.

10. Labels

Putting stickers all around your house is a proven method. Don't leave the stickers too long. On objects you see all the time, like a mirror, the stickers should be changed every week, on other objects every other week. Then replace the sticker with another one, on a more involved level. e.g.:

1st week: Mirror, mirrors

2nd week: The mirror is on the wall

3rd week: The mirror is above the sink

4th week: This mirror is clear / in need of cleaning

5th week: The mirror is made of glass with a coat of silver behind it.

6th week: This mirror is a liar - I'm really much prettier than what it shows me.

7th week: "Man looks at the outward appearance but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

11. Transport

Avoid using your car whenever possible. Try out ALL means of transport available: taxis, big taxis, unlicensed taxis, buses, minibuses, pick-up trucks. (All of these, apart from unlicensed taxis and pick-ups are fine for women, too.)

12. Travelling

Even if you don't have to go anywhere, take the train to somewhere (2nd class), take your vocabulary cards or your textbook along and study on the train, have a meal in the place you went to, find out something about the place and go back. If people ask you what in the world you were doing in Guercif you simply say truthfully that your language school sent you there to find out

about life / history / geography / nature / or whatever in Guercif.

Women can travel, too, but they would go with friends. If they go with Moroccan friends it would probably be to somewhere where that friend has family. With foreign friends they can almost travel like men, but chose a bit more touristy places than Guercif.

13. Mental games

Daydreaming:

We are always thinking about something, as it seems impossible for our mind to be completely without thoughts day or night. Now, when you catch yourself thinking about it, ask yourself: how would I say that in the target language?

Talk to your "recording angels"

In Islamic belief a person is constantly accompanied by an angel on the left who records all the bad deeds and one on the right who records all the good deeds. Now, for language purposes let's assume one of them is male and the other female. Tell them what you see in the earlier stages of your learning, and tell them what you think and feel in the later stages. If the idea of talking to recording angels doesn't appeal to you, imagine describing what you see to somebody you wished were with you. Only, this game only works if the imagined person only speaks your target language.

Tell the story:

In a similar way, when you watch a film, or read a newspaper in your language, stop before you go on to the next film or article and think how you would relate the gist of the story or article to somebody in your target language.

You'll be surprised how much content you can relate with very few words.

Derija or Fossha

Colloquial Arabic in Morocco is called Derijah. Fossha literally means “very clear” and Arabs use this term to distinguish written Arabic from their dialect. You will also encounter the terms International -, Modern Standard -, Newspaper -, or (incorrectly) Classical - Arabic.

There are obviously different opinions as to how much of which you will need. The proportion will normally depend on:

- 1. Your own interest and gifts**
- 2. The people you have to deal with and those you want to deal with.**
- 3. The type of work you are in.**

1. People with mathematical mindsets may thrive on grammar and should use this gift to get into Fossha. The more musical ones who are happy just to sit and chat with people for hours, may have a harder time with Fossha.

2. If the people you deal with are mainly uneducated, you obviously need more derija. With the educated you need more Fossha or French.

3. If your work is in book-based teaching and discussions, you need more Fossha. If you are into rural development, most of your teaching will be oral, story-telling and the like, you should acquire those skills in Derija. I would find it strange to do book-based studies and teaching in Derija, and as strange to tell stories in Fossha. In Moroccan schools we can observe that the teaching in all matters is based on books in Fossha but often enough the teachers would discuss those books and their opinions in Derija. While on the streets and in Cafés all sharing of knowledge is done in Derija, interspersed only with quotations from sacred writings in Fossha.

It is best to start with Derija (or another dialect, if you're not in Morocco) then do whatever you want to do next. A good student can reach a level of functionality in Derija within three months but would need at least a year to reach the same level in Fossha. Like someone who moves to Rome to study Latin will still want to know a bit of Italian to order his Cappuccino.

However, if your work long-term requires Fossha you should not underestimate the challenge of this language and get into it as soon as possible. Ideally a good student should move into Fossha after 6 months of language study, of which the first half should be intensive (at DMG that means 3 hours a day), and the latter half intensive (90 min/day of classroom instruction and more time for real life practice.)

Once you move on to Fossha you will still use Derija all the time, you will consolidate what you have learned and expand your treasure of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. After six months you will have friends and acquaintances who know now that they can talk to you in Derija. You will also attend Derija classes, like special seminars on topics of special interest, about Moroccan culture, etc. But your daily bread of studies will be Fossha.

Credibility is an issue. Fossha simply has much higher status than Derija. Your friends will still talk Derija with you, but when you're in your second year of studies they will start wondering: “Why study Derija, he could just sit with me and I could teach him more than any school ever could” - and he has got a point there. But when you tell him you study Fossha he'll understand that this is a serious matter, worthy of study.

Apart from credibility, Fossha is simply far more complex than Derija, and you need all of it for the simplest of things. Vowel marks being absent from virtually all books and newspapers, you need a lot of grammar simply to read. Also there is almost no reading material with artificially limited vocabulary like “easy readers” in other languages, which means that just to pick up any sort of everyday text you need a full equipment of grammar and a passive vocabulary of 4000 words.

A student will need vowelised texts to practise reading, and those are rare.

Which means, while you will be able to use any level of Derija that you've got, every day, you will only be able to use Your Fossha after you've passed the first big hurdle of grammar and vocabulary. It will take a good student a year to get there.

All these estimates are made for full-time students, for someone who can spend 6 hours a day in the target language, be it in class time, home work, private study time or by using it.

Recommended vowelised texts:

Cooking books

High motivational value, as they are often beautifully presented. They sometimes use various terms for ingredients, like refined Derija, even transliterated French and Fossha for different countries. Despite the limited scope highly recommended.

Children's books

Often very cheap, the downside is, they normally intend to enhance a child's vocabulary and teach many words that adults would hardly ever use. Therefore their use for language learners is limited. An exception are books that teach children the rites of Islam and children's encyclopedias or technical books. Those are highly recommended but watch that they are really fully vowelised.

School books

Very cheap and useful. Just skip the chapters on playing in the schoolyard and read those on Moroccan history, geography and the like.

In Morocco there are also books made for illiterate adults, which is exactly what we are. The second level is very useful, apart from the reading practice it provides, the functioning of a number of Moroccan institutions and administrations is explained, together with healthcare etc.

Religious books

Normally only the Qur'an and the Bible are vowelised, Hadiths etc are only where they quote. The Arabic of the Qur'an has undergone major semantic changes, and its study will teach you only religious language, which is useful in itself but won't help you to read the Newspapers.

There are a number of modern translations of the Bible which use style and vocabulary of modern current Arabic. Highly recommended for students on all levels.