How to really learn a foreign language

What to do...

- Study!
- Get a language partner
- Speak the language as often as you can
- Watch movies and television in the host language
- Listen to music in the host language
- Hang out in your community on the weekends
- Practice, practice, practice
- Get involved in clubs, activities, church, dance, exercise/gym, yoga, sports, cooking

What not to do...

Don’t:

- Be afraid to make mistakes
- Be afraid to step out of your comfort zone
- Criticize others’ mistakes
- Expect others to speak English to you
- Skip class
- Underestimate the power of non verbal communication and body language
- Travel to other countries every weekend with your American friends
- Don’t be afraid to speak English if someone wants an exchange partner

Tips for success...

- Try to avoid living with other Americans when possible
- Learn the slang as quickly as possible
- Find a program offering language partners and conversation hours
- Discuss your goals with your Resident Director
- Try to live with a host family or local students
- Join a club or campus organization
- Get involved with a hobby or interest you currently have
- Get an internship
- Volunteer
- Get an electronic dictionary
Practicing language on www.lang-8.com

**How to prepare...**

- Study the special nuances of the language in your region
- Learn basic “survival” phrases and customs before you go
- Get a pocket-sized language/travel book

E-mail from: Robbie Rickgauer, IP France, 2006-2007

Today is the first day of my week-long break, and I thought I'd take some time to drop you all a line.

So, what have I been up to? Well, I was dealing with some frustrations in adapting to the language. I was finding it very difficult to say what I wanted, as well as understand what other people were saying. This became especially frustrating as I was talking to my family one night, and found myself stumbling over the grammatical structure of my sentence like a dog on a frozen pond. The kids began giggling as I struggled, which just frustrated me even more. Finally, my host mother asked me to say the idea I was trying to convey in English. She later explained to me that sometimes, when I'm trying to say something in French, I have all the right words, but in the wrong order. So, it helps to say the idea in English, so she can help me figure out what I'm trying to say. I reflected on this a bit, and I came to the conclusion that I have been trying too hard with my French. I have been trying to think of myself as being at a higher level of French than I really am. I do need to slow down sometimes and just accept that I'm not yet perfect in the language.

The next night, while I was watching “Ghost” (dubbed in French, of course) with my family, I was having a hard time picking up on what they were saying. I could pick out words, but I couldn't quite catch the ideas. Finally, I realized that I need to stop trying to translate everything in my mind they're saying, just roll with the words I know and try to form ideas. After that, I found my comprehension level went way up! I admit that there is still a lot I don't understand, but I feel like I have removed a massive comprehension barrier. **Now, instead of seeing the English word after the French word, I see the symbolic meaning that they share.** My mind was doing fine with translating the word into meaning, but I was just making the process harder by trying to switch it back into English. **Let this be a lesson: When trying to learn a language, don't translate everything.**

Ever since, I feel like my French skills have gotten much better and I understand people talking around me almost involuntarily. I am definitely on the road to French fluency, and all it really took was for me to just relax and stop trying so hard.

As for homesickness... I still miss things at home occasionally. My old roommates from Chico have been e-mailing me, and, as much as I love to hear from them, their continuing antics without me does make me miss home a bit. **I've stopped trying to count down the days until my return and I think I'm really enjoying the French experience.** Learning a new language in a foreign land is a very exciting experience. The prospect of being able to cross the language barrier and finally talk to people of a different background, culture and set of beliefs is very exciting. **That keeps my head afloat.**

So, my vacation... since I already spent a wad of cash on Oktoberfest and am planning a brief trip to Paris next month, I figured that I'd take it easy this vacation and not do anything terribly big. I have some friends who are going to exotic cities like Rome, Amsterdam and Brussels, but I'm just going to relax, do some reading, maybe see a few local sites, and catch up with friends who aren't going anywhere. There's a day-trip to St. Tropez this Sunday. Maybe I'll check that out.

Anywho, I have a day to get on with. I'll send pictures soon. Keep sending your thoughts my way. They are very much appreciated!

Au revoir,
Robbie