

Study Advice and Checklist for Completing a Unit

We spend a little more than one week of class time on each Kontext – about 5 classroom hours. So for each Kontext the average student aiming for average performance and thus an average grade (4 / B-) should put in about 10 hours of study time (= 50 minutes + 10-minute break). This means time on-task, not time organizing materials or time when you're not really focussed on learning.

We suggest studying in segments of about half an hour. If you study for more than an hour at one time, aim for wide variety in your activities, for example an hour with the classroom learning materials and an hour on your current individualized project.

How you spend your study time should fit the goals of the course, the tests you will take, and an understanding of how language learning occurs. The main goal of the course is the ability to use the language for practical communication in real time, both speaking and writing. The more your study resembles such communication, the better you are likely to do in the course. Even if much class time is devoted to face-to-face communication, those few hours a week are not nearly enough. So whatever you can do outside class that resembles the communicative activities in class will be valuable. That includes speaking, of course, and also listening, and interaction with the authentic cultural materials (sounds and graphics) that are part of everyday living and communication.

Studying outside class with a partner or in a small group will support the effort at real-time communication – but only if you do communicative activities together. If instead you talk, in English, about the language you are trying to learn, attempt to explain it to each other, or do one-word vocabulary quizzes in “flashcard” style, you probably won't make much progress in actually using the language, even if you think that after all that work you “know this stuff.” It's not enough to know *about* the language; you have to be able to *do* it.

Preconceptions about language study can be a big problem. Avoid activities that you think can substitute for the ones described here, whether you have adopted them from other language courses, the advice of others, or your general picture of what learning a language involves. We encounter the same harmful preconceptions over and over, so let's deal with them directly right here and now. It is *not* your job to acquire an intellectual mastery of grammar, to memorize vocabulary lists, or to translate from one language into the other. Unproductive behaviors, in the classroom or outside it, include requests for detailed analytic explanation, preoccupation with exceptions, demands for word-for-word translation, and comments about how weird this other language is (or how much more rational it is than English). If you substitute those activities for the appropriate ones, your performance in class and on tests, and thus your grade, may suffer.

On the next page, first as an itemized time budget and then as a final checklist, we give recommendations for what to study, how to study, how much to study, and how to know when you've studied enough. Certainly each learner is different, but it is unlikely that you can learn to speak the language without practicing speaking it, or that you can come to understand the spoken language without spending much time listening to the spoken language.

The same goes for writing and reading. The authentic cultural materials (sounds and graphics) are intended to deliver cultural knowledge, enrich your vocabulary, and give you something to communicate about; you should interact with them regularly and often. Lastly, the individual projects are intended to motivate your learning and provide you with enriched language that suits your own needs. You should put your heart into them, rather than attempting to get them over as quickly and easily as possible.

And remember to use your instructor as a resource outside of class. It is truly amazing how many students fail to do that, and instead try to make it all on their own or with the questionable help of people who aren't much better able than themselves to tell how to learn a language.

Plan for Studying a Unit

hours

- 1/2 • Read the goals for the unit and listen to the sounds that illustrate them. Wander through the authentic cultural materials (sounds and graphics), but without close attention to individual words. If a previous unit has a similar theme, spend a few minutes reviewing it; units 4, 6, 8 and 16 are about food, for example, and units 3, 7, 11 and 15 are about transportation.
- 2 • (at least two sessions separated by a few days) Dialog practice for listening comprehension and models for speaking. Use the dialogs the same way you processed the spoken world when you were very small: lots of listening practice, brief attempts at emulation, and then more extensive imitation. If you ignore the sounds and go straight to the text, you are making a big mistake. If you go quickly to the English vocabulary list and try to translate the texts of the dialogs, you are making another big mistake. Doing it right, for productive learning, means listening, trying to understand, using as few helps as possible, and eventually speaking on your own with much of the language used by the people in the dialogs. Some students find it useful to hear the dialog speeches and try to write them in the language, without looking at the printed text.
- 2 • (at least two sessions, one early-mid in the unit and the other near the end) Vocabulary practice. Yes, look at the words and their English equivalents, but don't stop there. In real communication, words are surrounded by other words. Try using the words in sentences of your own (spoken and written). Try replying to those sentences. Try using other words and sentences to get your partner to use one of the words you have secretly in mind.
- 2 • (two sessions separated by a few days) Work with the broadcast and graphic resources. Each piece has been selected to be at least partly within your range of comprehension, and each is related to the theme or the specific language of the unit, or often both. The goal is not to understand (much less, look up) every word, but rather to learn about the culture, enrich your supplemental vocabulary, and improve your comprehension skills by working toward the meaning of things you don't yet understand by using words you can. For graphics resources, skim and scan a few times, then look up a few words that seem important (they are in bold print, are repeated, etc.). For broadcast resources, if you listen to a segment at all, listen to it 3-5 times (but no more during one session). Look at the text information only after you have really tried to understand the spoken language. This work is your standing assignment for each unit, where you make sentences from words in the resources.
- 1 • (spread over two sessions) Read the unit "structures" information, listen to the sounds which illustrate its points, perhaps return to the dialogs to see how they illustrate the structures, and go over any writing you have done to see whether you have employed the structures.
- 1/2 • (at end of unit) Go back to the unit overview. Ask yourself sincerely whether you have learned what you were to learn, and produce some language that demonstrates it. Review a unit that is not the immediately previous one.
- 2 • (several sessions throughout the unit) Work on your current individualized project and revise previous versions of your projects, assignments, and tests.

Self-evaluation checklist at the end of a unit

- ___ I have invested at least 8 hours of serious learning time in this unit outside the classroom.
- ___ I have listened to each dialog several times on each of two separate days. I challenged my comprehension skills by attempting to recognize old words and understand new words, without using the printed text and the vocabulary lists as constant crutches. I have repeated out loud several times each speaker's dialog lines. I have tried more than once to re-create each speaker's part of the conversation *without* looking at the text.
- ___ I have not only looked at the printed language of the unit, but also frequently listened to it, spoken it, and written it down.
- ___ I have looked seriously at at least half the graphics resources for the unit, and have listened several times to at least half of the broadcast segments.
- ___ I have practiced new vocabulary in a larger language context, for example by creating spoken or written sentences that use target vocabulary words for meaningful communication.
- ___ I have looked at the "structures" explanations and listened to their sound resources. When I returned to the dialogs and the authentic cultural materials, I was able to recognize in them some of the structures of the unit.
- ___ I have repeated outside of class some of the activities that were done in class, especially those that involved real-time communication.
- ___ I have read the "overview" section of the unit and now understand how the new language of the unit contributes to accomplishing those goals. I now can do better some things that I could do already with the resources of earlier units, but not as capably or easily before.
- ___ I have looked over earlier work that has been returned to me and have revised it for regarding.
- ___ I have checked the course website at least once during the unit to see whether new materials and messages have been posted.