



GLOSSA

505248-2009-LLP-GR-KA2MP

GLOSSA-REP-WP02-2.7 EL (EN)

Methodology for on-line language learning for advanced students

7/12/2010



Lifelong Learning Programme



Education and Culture DG

EACEA
Education, Audiovisual & Culture
Executive Agency



Education
and
Training

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Kindersite Project (UK)

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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INTRODUCTION

This document is intended to be used as a practical guide for advanced level students that are studying less used European languages. It has been produced for the project “GLOSSA- Greek as a Vehicle for promoting linguistic diversity” (505248-2009-LLP-GR-KA2MP) which is supported by the European Union’s Lifelong Learning Program (Key Activity 2- Languages).

The objective of the document is not to present and analyze to language students all the methods and tools available for online language learning. As this is available in the comparative study for the teaching methodologies for online language learning that has been produced by the project and is available on the project’s website www.ellinikiglossa.eu . The aim of this document is to give brief, clear, practical and concise tips to students that will help them in their studies.

There are two main self-study methods related to language learning:

- **Cognitive learner strategies:** Cognitive learner strategies deal directly with the second language. Examples are memorization or repetition of vocabulary.
- **Metacognitive learner strategies:** In contrast to the cognitive learner strategies, metacognitive learner strategies do not deal with the language itself, but with the regulation of the learning process. This includes planning, self-monitoring, and evaluation of the learning.

The present methodology will start by presenting the metacognitive learner strategies that will be useful for advanced level language student in order to maximize the efficiency of learning and then present cognitive learner strategies related on the development of the 4 basic skills.

The methodology is based on extensive research that was completed in all the partner countries that participated in the GLOSSA project (Greece, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Czech Republic, Hungary, UK) through desk research, case study analysis and field research. The research was completed using the Greek language as a case study, however, the present methodology is applicable for all of the less used European language confirming the title of the project “Greek as a vehicle for promoting linguistic diversity”.

ORGANIZATION OF THE LEARNING

Many times, when studying in an online language learning course or in a self learning course, the most difficult aspect is the organization of the work that has to be done. In a “live” face-to-face course the teacher is organizing most of the work that has to be done. However, in an online course the role of the tutor (when s/he exists) is weaker and therefore, the students have to organize their work by themselves. Intrinsic motivation is the most important part for an advanced level language student, especially for the less used European languages. Self-studying demands self-discipline and a strong motive. It also demands training in self studying while students need to be self conscience of their language learning style. They have to develop their own personal strategies in order to study at home.

1. Set your goal

The first thing that you can do to organize your learning, in the best possible way, is to consider your past learning experiences and ask yourself a number of questions. The fact that you are an advanced level student means that you already have many previous learning experiences from which you can benefit. Examples of the questions that should be asked are:

- Do you prefer to study alone or in a group?
- What problems have you encountered in your past learning (lack of motivation, lack of time, problems to keep up with the schedule etc.)?
- What activities did you enjoy the most (reading articles, watching videos, listening to audios, communicating with people etc)?
- Which skills have you learned more easily and which skills are more difficulty?

By answering these questions you will know if:

- you prefer to study using traditional learning methodologies or Web2.0 applications
- which are the aspects of the course that you will need to focus on
- which skills you should give stress more
- where to study

Once you have thought about your past learning experience, you can begin to consider the course that you are about to take and think about,

- why do you want to take this course and what do you want to achieve using this course (professional skills, cultural skills, pleasure etc.)
- how much time are you able to dedicate to the course
- what are your priorities.

These tips will help you organize your study correctly, based on the previous questions:



- Set realistic goals (do not expect to learn everything in the 1st week of study, you will be disappointed if you do not achieve that).

- Visit the e-learning platform at least once a day. Thirty minutes to one hour per day of study is sufficient, but you have to visit. It is very important to work constantly with the platform and not just the days before an assignment is due.

- Make the course one of your main priorities. If the course is considered a secondary priority you will always be putting off studying for something else.

- Use your past experience to make conclusions for the future. Something that has been problematic in the past, will almost certainly create problems again.

- Concentrate on the skills in which you are weakest.

- Try to utilise issues that you enjoyed in the past (e.g. culture etc.).

- Choose the method of study (alone or with a group) in the way that best fit your needs.

2. Prepare a Schedule

Now you are ready to prepare a time schedule and deadlines. With self-study, it is helpful to develop and design a very precise schedule for the course. Creating a schedule, timetable and deadlines will help you to meet your own expectations. Everyone knows which skills they want to improve the most, and then can focus on the exercises that target its development. Being strict and objective is very important, as this is the first revising point. If a tutor is part of the course you should contact him in order to organize your learning activities.

Tips to develop a helpful schedule:



- Write in a calendar the important dates for your study (date for delivery of assignments, date for completion of unit, date for a progress test etc.).

- Make a “to do list” for every week with the tasks that you want to accomplish.
- Check off the tasks when they have been completed.
- If relevant, write in your agenda, tasks that you have to complete on a daily basis.

3. Stick to your schedule

The preparation of a schedule is the easy part of the process. The hard part is sticking to the schedule that you have prepared. To stick to a schedule the first thing to do is to set your priorities.



- Decide what is the most important for you. Plan your activities according to the priorities. Do not allow other priorities to distract you.
- Do not be disappointed at the first problem that you encounter. Nobody understands everything the first time. Patience is one of the most important values for a language learner.
- Try to concentrate to the positive areas of your studies (areas that you enjoy, like cultural or social).
- Be responsible. Make decisions about your priorities and your deadlines.
- Understand the hours that you are productive and when you are not.

An important issue is to maximize your concentration when you are studying, that will help you stay on your schedule. These tips can help:



- Choose a quiet and comfortable environment to study.
- Take breaks. Spending a long time studying without a break can lead to you becoming less productive.
- Set goals: Schedule an exact time to complete an activity (e.g. I will accomplish task X by 17.00).
- Do not let yourself to be distracted (looking at other websites etc.).

4. Evaluation

A very important part of the organization of your work is self-evaluation. You should evaluate the work that you have done periodically and ask yourself:

- Have I stuck to the learning schedule I set?
- Have I completed the learning targets I set?
- Have I done everything according to my expectations?

If the answer is 'No' to any of the above, you have to then ask:

- What went wrong?
- How can I improve?
- What kind of help do I need (from tutor, administrator of the course etc.)?

On the basis of this evaluation, you should then plan the next study period.

REVISION

“Revision is the mother of learning” a Greek saying. You should revise as much as possible to consolidate the learning that you have acquired. Online courses are individual to the extent that you can choose areas for revision, based on your own needs. However, the biggest opportunities of self-studying can also be the biggest pitfalls.

But by managing your own time, you can neglect learning if your motivation is not strong enough. This area of the self-study process will always remain a delicate issue, because everyone can be easy on themselves. Even if you are strict with studying, and doing exercises, writing, speaking, when the self-examination time is coming it will slow you down.



Do not be easy on yourself.

Everyone knows that this is one of the most important areas of learning, getting feedback about their improvement. But everybody is afraid of failure.



Do not be afraid of failure.

Follow a well structured line while you are studying:

- First understanding the task,
- Then do it alone, or with the assistance of the tutor,
- Later practice,
- Then self-revise

In this way, when the final exam arrives, you will be ready for the challenge.



Before going on to the next task, be sure that you master the content of the previous ones.

When possible, use tests that have the answers checked immediately, this allows instant evaluation and feedback.

When possible use multiple choice and gapfill exercises.

When talking to your fellow students, challenge each other, and compare your knowledge. In this way, the better student can help support weaker students.

PRACTICE YOUR READING SKILLS

Reading skills can be developed through the using a wide range of texts, articles and dialogues with post-reading comprehension tasks. Choose the texts that you are going to read from trustworthy sources. These could be either texts that have been suggested by the tutor or texts from good newspapers, literature etc.



Use always authentic texts.

For advanced language level students, edited texts are counter-productive. You should be able to use authentic texts of the language you are learning. You can use:

- Magazines and newspapers
- Literary texts
- Information portals
- RSS (web feeds in a standardized format which are used to publish blogs, audio and video) leads
- e-books
- Online libraries
- Multimedia encyclopedias
- Tourist pages with descriptions of cities and culture
- Authentic videos and films without subtitles or with subtitles in the target language (same language as the audio)



Try to engage with the text you are reading. Find out more about the author, about the time etc. This will help your understanding.

If a glossary is not provided, use your dictionary (or other trustworthy online dictionaries) in order to understand any new vocabulary, such as idioms, sayings, idiomatic/not common or difficult expressions.



If you have problems with the vocabulary, try to identify which are the most needed words for the unit and which words are secondary. Try to focus your attention on the first category.

If a comprehension test follows a text, it is highly recommended to complete it. The results of the test will help you to assess if you have understood correctly or not.

Blogs or personal diaries can also be used to practise reading. These applications give you a feel for a more personal and immediate style of writing and are frequently a source of excellent quality texts.

When you find them available you should utilise exercises for: reading comprehension tests, mistake correction, multiple choice questions, true/false statements, keyword selection followed by using them in sentences, putting sentences or paragraphs of a text into the correct order, writing a summary of the text using key words as a follow-up activity (or doing this orally and recording it and later comparing with the original text). Text builders (taking words out and reconstructing texts later).



For advanced learners, topics for reading and listening activities can be politics, history, economy, literature, science, health, opinion, arts, technology, education, environment... etc.

PRACTICE YOUR LISTENING SKILLS

Listening skills development can be done in two ways; a pre-recorded audio that you can listen to and then complete follow-up tasks or live listening sessions: student-tutor or student-student or multiple students.

With pre-recorded listening, listening skills can be developed using many types of audio materials:

- Texts
- Dialogues
- Short videos
- Podcasts
- Songs.



It is highly recommended that authentic materials (from TV, radio or podcasts) are used where possible.

Authentic videos and audios will make you feel more confident about your knowledge by hearing different accents, levels, dialects and dialectal forms of the spoken language in varied communication circumstances (everyday talk, politicians' speech, etc.).

When available, take benefit of comprehension exercises that can be checked immediately using e.g. multiple choice questions, gapfills, ticking pictures, true/false statements, specific comprehension questions, etc.

You can also listen to real-life dialogue sentence by sentence.



When a transcript is available, do not use it for the first listening. Listen first to the text without a script and then use it the second time if things that remain unclear. The same is valid for the subtitles.



Listen to music. This is a fun and efficient way to improve your listening skills.

You can look for videos and music of the language that you are studying on: YouTube, TeacherTube, etc.



One of the best practices for listening and understanding revision, is to listen to audio material, and then answer questions on the material.

Audio books, blogs and online radios can be helpful to develop your listening skills.



For advanced learners, topics for reading and listening activities can be politics, history, economy, literature, science, health, opinion, arts, technology, education, environment... etc.

PRACTICE YOUR WRITING SKILLS

In **writing**, the role of the tutor becomes all important. Many aspects of study can be dealt with in self-study, but writing must be read and corrected by an online course tutor who can also provide relevant feedback. This is the case both for writing exercises of the material and for Web2.0 applications.



If you don't have a tutor, find a native speaker that you can trust that has an appropriate level of knowledge of the language. When possible, a tutor is always the best option.

Some fun and informal ways of developing writing skills are:

- writing a blog,
- writing chat, forums,
- playing writing games, like crosswords and word-gallows,
- Commenting on news sites, blogs, facebook or other social groups' notifications etc.
Express your argument in a clear way
- Storytelling based on photos or other materials.

Join a language learning community for the language that you are learning. For example, if learning Greek join Facebook pages in Greek or comment on Greek blogs. Always try to find someone to correct your mistakes, a tutor or proficient native speaker.

Other more supervised techniques online can include, using presentation makers (for example: Prezi), Google docs, Wiki editing. These can be individual practice documents, or can be worked on collaboratively.

PRACTICE YOUR SPEAKING SKILLS

Speaking skills can be practiced with online communication tools (mostly), but also with offline tools (secondly). With online communication tools we mean tools such as Skype or online conference platforms and with offline tools we mean mainly tools that allow you to record and listen to your voice such as audacity.

It is important, to have a friendly atmosphere to lower participants inhibitions, so they will speak freely, even if they make mistakes.



Do not be afraid to make mistakes when you are speaking. The important thing is to speak.

Communication can be made through the use of Web2.0 applications like Skype, MSN or through online video and phone conferences. These calls can be informal, and used just to keep the network operating well. Participants can share their experiences; help each other solve problems, although the theme does not just have to focus on 'language learning'.

If you don't find a native speaker, try to get the tutor/mentor to participate in the online conversations.



Try to check your pronunciation by recording yourself. Record yourself and compare your pronunciation with that of a native speaker. This will help you to improve. Online tools like Audacity can be used.

It is a good idea to use some pronunciation activities for words with difficult sounds/phonemes.

Also conversations can focus on:

- Pronunciation of new vocabulary items
- Audio files for texts, vocabulary and phrases
- Use songs, (with subtitles) or karaoke programs. By singing the lyrics the correct pronunciation can lock in your head.
- Editing an audio blog is an innovative way of improving speaking skills, and also to overcome inhibitions