

Pre-Departure Speaking Activities

You may think that it is best to wait until you are safely ensconced in your new environment to worry about really trying to speak the target language. Guess what? It may be less stressful if you start beforehand to “break the language barrier.”

Some of you may be lucky enough to be at schools where there are programs designed to help you meet international or local students who speak the language you are learning. Or it may be that you live in an area that has a community of people who are native speakers of the language you are learning. In either case, you have a great opportunity to spend some time before you leave speaking the language with native speakers. Here are some useful suggestions from students who themselves have prepared to study abroad:

- Spend a day with a native speaker or group of speakers of the target language.
- Have a regular meeting with a conversational partner over coffee.
- Practice the language over the phone if you cannot meet in person.
- Offer a language exchange with international students on your campus—the internationals practice their native language with you in exchange for your help in improving their conversational skills in English.

If you don't know groups of students who speak the language you are trying to learn, try some of these strategies:

- Contact your school's study abroad office, language departments, or local community groups that are involved with international activities to locate native speakers of the language you are learning.
- If you are enrolled in a language class, you could ask if your instructor knows of opportunities outside of class to practice your new language.
- At the least, you'll want to speak up in class as much as possible!

The more time that you can spend practicing speaking, the better. Whenever and however you can, try to find opportunities to surround yourself with the target language. When you do this, you are allowing yourself to open up to the new language and lessen the “language shock” you may experience when you are in another country. If you don't have any of these opportunities available to you before departure, read on and discover strategies you can use once you have arrived in your host country.

Pre-Departure Listening Activities

To me, the number one project for pre-departure would be EXPOSE YOURSELF TO THE LANGUAGE (which I did not do enough)! Rent movies. Go to conversation groups. Figure out how to get a host country radio station over the Internet. Order books-on-tape in the target language through interlibrary loan. (Or better: ask your language teachers. They probably have stuff.) I'm sort of ranting because the one aspect of my German that is the most frustrating is the inability to understand speech. ~ Molly Zahn, Germany

In getting ready to go to Malaysia, I had great plans to study the language before leaving. But working to pay for the trip and studying for the heavy course load I had were all that I could manage! Before leaving, I did review some basic grammar and pronunciation. People had told me that I would be able to get by with English. They were right, I could get by with English. But even better than getting by, I was also able to learn some Bahasa Malaysian and some Cantonese from friends I met in-country. Being open to the language and the basics that I reviewed before departing made a big difference. ~ Barbara Kappler, Malaysia

1. Listen to radio from your host country over the Internet. You can find good sites simply by launching a browser and searching for keywords such as “international radio” or the language you are interested in and the word “radio.”
2. Form a group to watch foreign films (ones that are not dubbed into English) in the target language. Listen to the movies while taking into account the strategies suggested in this section.
3. Find tapes or CDs of music recorded in the foreign language and try to understand it not only for its words, but also for its meaning. Being familiar with popular music and musicians from the country also gives you something to talk about with new friends.
4. If available, go to a local market where they speak your target language and eavesdrop on common conversations about the prices of meat or the quality of the produce. Listen to the grocer give directions to someone on where to find a particular item in the store.

Pre-Departure Vocabulary Learning Activities

Want to impress your fellow travelers with your language skills? Do you have visions of saying just the right thing when you meet your host family? Or do you just want to know you can keep up your end in a basic conversation? You'll want to brush up on your vocabulary so that when you arrive you won't be groping around for important words. Here are a few things you can do before you go:

- Make a list of the words you expect to need often. Make flash cards or put these in your journal so you can review them every day.
- Purchase sets of ready-made flash cards available at student bookstores and online (just search for the language you want and "flash cards"). Tip: Often the ready-made sets of cards include extra information about the words, such as the forms for the verbs in different tenses.
- Spend time with native speakers and have them provide you with crucial vocabulary you might not know. You will need to tell your partner what situation you need vocabulary for, such as calling a museum to get information about hours. Then your partner will be able to walk you through a mock conversation.
- Make a commitment to learn ten new words a day.
- Discover materials that you can read online. Look for newspapers, magazines, articles about your hobbies, etc. in your target language.
- Think of yourself as a natural topic of conversation and learn how to talk about *you*. People in your host country may be quite curious about you, or the conversation may turn to you simply as a cultural expression of politeness. Either way, it will be helpful, especially when you first arrive, to know some ready statements about yourself.

Potential conversation topics may include:

- **Your basic activities in the host country:** What are you doing there? Studying economics at the local university? Researching the traditional fiber arts of the area? Learn the correct words and phrases needed to express these activities.
- **Your living situation in the host country:** What city or region of the country are you in? Do you have a host family? Are you sharing an apartment with other students? Are you living in a dormitory?
- **Your length of stay in the host country:** When did you arrive? How long will you stay? Will you travel? What do you hope to see or do?
- **Your life in the U.S.:** Where are you from in the U.S.? Are you a student? Do you work full-time? What do you do for recreation/fun in the U.S.?
- **Your family:** Where is your family? Do you have brothers and sisters? Are you married? Do you have children?

Pre-Departure Reading Activities

Like to read poetry? Science fiction? Cookbooks? Whatever you like to read in English is the best thing to read in your target language before study abroad. Why? Because you'll have the motivation to read it! Here are a few tips for finding resources in your target language:

- Ask your language teachers
- Check your university or local library's collection for subscriptions to international and national newspapers
- Search the Internet using your host country's name as your keyword
- Skim through the phone book for bookstores selling foreign books
- Talk to a local native speaker for their suggestions
- Ask fellow students, local native speakers, or your language teacher if you can borrow materials
- Choose a dictionary that's best for you to aid in your reading practice

Bilingual dictionaries (English to/from another language) can be misleading because there may not be direct equivalence between the English word and the word in the target language. **Monolingual dictionaries** (single language) can be more helpful in truly understanding the meaning of words, but then you need to be versed enough in the language to understand the definition!

Monolingual and bilingual dictionaries: There are some dictionaries that are both monolingual and bilingual in the same book, which solves the problem of either/or.

Electronic dictionaries make word retrieval quicker. Many electronic dictionaries allow you to store vocabulary you come across when you are out and about. You can review this vocabulary at your leisure, with the dictionary taking the role of flash cards.

Learner dictionaries may be more helpful to low-intermediate learners because they make some effort to use simplified language. Nonetheless, be prepared for them not to be simplified enough at times. A classic case is a learner dictionary of English that defined "to moor" as "to secure or fasten to the dock." The learner didn't know what "secure," "fasten," or "dock" meant, so the definition was useless! In this case, the learner needed also to look up the unknown words in the definition until she finally could understand the word "moor."