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Speaking & Traveling With Ease In A Foreign Language:
A Simple 6-Step Guide

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Traveling to a foreign country can be a thrilling experience, but it can also be a daunting one if you don't speak the local language.

However, don't let this discourage you from exploring new destinations! With a little preparation and some helpful tips, you can navigate your way through a foreign country with ease, even if you don't speak the language.

1. Learn Some Key Phrases

Before you leave, take the time to learn some key phrases in the local language. This will help you navigate common situations like greetings, asking for directions, making purchases, and showing politeness. It's also a good idea to learn some simple phrases related to your specific travel needs, such as ordering food, booking transportation, or checking into a hotel.

Here are some basics to nail down:

Hello/greetings

Goodbye

Please

Thank you

Yes/no

Excuse me/sorry

I'm sorry, I don't speak (the language).

Do you speak English?

Where is...?

How much does it cost?

Can you help me?

I need a doctor/medicines/hospital.

Could you write that down for me?

Can you recommend a good...

PRO TIP

Take a screenshot of this section so it's always handy in your phone for when you need it.

Language-learning Apps & Websites

Duolingo is a free language-learning app that offers lessons in many different languages. It uses a gamified approach to language learning, which makes it fun and engaging.

Babbel is a subscription-based language-learning app that offers lessons in many different languages. It uses a more traditional approach to language learning, focusing on grammar and vocabulary.

Rosetta Stone is a popular language-learning app that uses a natural immersion approach to language learning. It offers lessons in many different languages and uses interactive activities to help users learn.

Memrise is a language-learning app that uses a combination of video, audio, and interactive exercises to help users learn. It offers lessons in many different languages and is free to use.

Lingoda is a language-learning website that offers online classes in many different languages. It uses a more traditional approach to language learning, with live classes and personalized feedback.

Busuu is a language-learning app that offers lessons in many different languages. It uses a community-based approach to language learning, where users can interact with native speakers and get feedback on their progress.

Surprising Language To Avoid

It's important to avoid using swear words, slang, informal or vulgar language, as these can be highly offensive in some cultures.

Here are some examples of words that might not be considered rude or offensive in one language, but could be inappropriate or offensive in another language:

- In American English, the slang term “buddy” is often used as a friendly term of address for someone, but in Australian English, it can be considered condescending or sarcastic.
- In British English, the term “bloody” is often used as a mild swear word, but in some other English-speaking countries, it may be considered more offensive.
- In Mexican Spanish, the term “chido” is used to describe something as cool or awesome, but in some South American countries, it can be considered vulgar or inappropriate.

- In Brazilian Portuguese, the term “legal” is used to describe something as cool or awesome, but in Portugal, it can be considered outdated or inappropriate.
- In French, the term “baiser” means “to kiss” but in Canadian French, it can also mean “to have sex”, so it’s important to be aware of the context in which it’s used.
- In Japanese, the term “chotto matte” is used to mean “wait a moment”, but if mispronounced, it can sound like the word for “nipple”, which could be embarrassing or inappropriate in some situations.

Avoid asking overly personal questions, such as questions about someone’s income, relationship status, or family history. These types of questions may be considered invasive or inappropriate in some cultures. Here are some specific examples of cultural differences regarding personal questions:

- In many Western cultures, it’s considered impolite to ask someone about their age or marital status, as it can be seen as a way of categorizing or stereotyping them based on their demographic characteristics. In contrast, in many Asian cultures, asking someone about their age or marital status is often seen as a way of showing respect or acknowledging their seniority or social status.
- In some cultures, such as Latin American or Mediterranean cultures, asking someone about their family background or ancestry is considered a way of establishing rapport or finding common ground, as family ties are highly valued. However, in other cultures, such as Nordic or East Asian cultures, personal questions about family history or background may be seen as intrusive or irrelevant.
- In some cultures, such as American or Australian cultures, asking someone about their income or financial situation is often considered impolite or taboo, as money is seen as a private matter. In contrast, in some Middle Eastern or South Asian cultures, discussing money and wealth is often seen as a way of establishing social status and respect.
- In some Western cultures, such as European or North American cultures, asking someone about their religious beliefs or practices is often considered impolite or inappropriate, as religion is seen as a personal matter. However, in some other cultures, such as Middle Eastern or South Asian cultures, religion is often seen as a central aspect of identity and social interaction, and it may be common to ask someone about their religious background or beliefs.

2. Research The Culture

Before you go, do some research on the culture of the country you will be visiting. This can help you understand the local customs, traditions, and social norms, and avoid unintentional cultural faux pas.

Here are some questions you can ask:

Are there any specific greeting gestures or phrases I should know?

What are the dress codes for different occasions or places? Are there any clothing items that are considered inappropriate or disrespectful?

Are there any specific dining customs or table manners I should be aware of? For example, is it customary to tip in restaurants, or is it considered impolite to finish all the food on your plate?

What are the local traditions and festivals? Are there any events that I should attend or be aware of during my visit?

What are the cultural taboos or sensitive topics that I should avoid discussing or bringing up in conversation?

What are the expectations around punctuality and time management? Is it acceptable to arrive late to meetings or appointments?

What are the religious beliefs and practices in the country? Are there any specific customs or rituals I should be aware of?

What is the local attitude towards bargaining or haggling? Is it customary to negotiate prices, or are fixed prices the norm?

What are the transportation customs and etiquette? Are there any specific rules or expectations when using public transportation or hiring a taxi?

Cultural Mistakes To Avoid

- **Dressing inappropriately:** Different cultures have different dress codes and standards, so it's important to research the local customs before packing for your trip. For example, in some cultures, it's considered disrespectful to show too much skin or wear revealing clothing.
- **Not respecting local customs and traditions:** Be respectful of local customs and traditions, such as customs around greetings, table manners, and religious practices.
- **Ignoring social norms:** Different cultures have different social norms, and ignoring them can lead to misunderstanding or offense. For example, in some cultures, it's considered impolite to interrupt someone during a conversation or to be too direct in your communication.
- **Being unaware of local etiquette:** Etiquette can vary greatly between cultures, and not being aware of local etiquette can cause offense. For example, in some cultures, it's considered rude to eat or drink in public places, while in others, it's perfectly acceptable.
- **Being too loud or boisterous:** Some cultures value quietness and reserve, while others are more expressive. Be aware of the local culture and adjust your behavior accordingly.
- **Not tipping appropriately:** Tipping customs can vary greatly between cultures, and not tipping appropriately can be seen as disrespectful. Check out tipping guidelines for 10 of the most traveled countries [here](#).
- **Being closed-minded:** Being open-minded and respectful of other cultures is key to a successful trip. Avoid making judgments or assumptions based on your own cultural background, and be willing to learn and adapt to the local culture.

3. Use A Translation App

A translation app can be your best friend when traveling in a foreign language. There are many apps available, such as Google Translate or iTranslate, that can translate words and phrases in real-time. Some apps even allow you to take a picture of text, such as a sign or menu, and translate it instantly. Make sure to download the app and any necessary language packs before you leave, so you can use it offline if you don't have access to Wi-Fi.

There are many translation apps available, but some of the most popular and highly rated ones include:

Google Translate: This is a free app that supports over 100 languages, and it allows you to translate text, speech, and even images.

Microsoft Translator: This app supports over 60 languages, and it offers a range of features such as text and speech translation, conversation translation, and even offline translation.

iTranslate: This app supports over 100 languages, and it offers a variety of features such as text and voice translation, offline translation, and even a dictionary and thesaurus.

Translate Now: This is a free app that supports over 100 languages, and it offers text and speech translation, as well as the ability to save translations and access them later.

Papago: This app supports over 14 languages, and it offers a variety of features such as text and speech translation, conversation translation, and even a dictionary and phrasebook.

TripLingo: This app is designed specifically for travelers, and it offers a range of features such as text and speech translation, a culture and etiquette guide, and even local emergency numbers.

Keep These Points In Mind

- Don't rely too heavily on translation apps as they can sometimes provide inaccurate translations or miss the nuances of language.
- Translation apps may not be able to accurately translate complex or lengthy sentences, so it's best to keep your language simple and direct.
- Always double-check the translations provided by the app, as mistakes can happen. Be prepared to make corrections or clarifications as needed.

PRO TIP

In Google Translate, download the language so you can use it offline!

4. Carry A Phrasebook

A phrasebook is a useful tool for traveling in a foreign language. It can help you communicate basic needs, such as ordering food or asking for directions, and can also provide you with cultural insights and helpful tips. Look for a phrasebook that includes phonetic pronunciations and is organized by topic, such as “food” or “transportation.”

Lonely Planet Phrasebook & Dictionary

This is a comprehensive phrasebook with over 120 languages covered, including useful phrases for everyday situations such as greetings, food, transportation, and emergencies.

Berlitz Phrasebook & Dictionary

This is another popular phrasebook with over 60 languages covered. It includes a range of useful phrases for travelers, including those related to ordering food, asking for directions, and shopping.

Rick Steves' Phrase Book

This phrasebook is specifically designed for travelers to Europe, with a focus on French, German, Italian, and Spanish. It includes helpful phrases for navigating train stations, hotels, and restaurants.

Collins Gem Phrasebook & Dictionary

This is a pocket-sized phrasebook with over 40 languages covered. It includes essential phrases and vocabulary for travelers, as well as a mini-dictionary for each language.

DK Eyewitness Travel Phrase Book

This phrasebook covers over 15 languages and includes useful phrases for common situations such as ordering food, shopping, and asking for directions. It also includes a pronunciation guide for each language.

Don't Assume Your Phrasebook Is Always Correct

- Phrasebooks can sometimes be outdated or contain errors, so it's important to double-check any phrases with a native speaker if possible.
- Make sure to practice the pronunciation of the phrases in your phrasebook, as mispronouncing words can lead to misunderstandings.
- In some countries, there may be regional dialects or variations in language that differ from the standard language. Be sure to research and understand any regional differences before you travel.

PRO TIP

If you're ever unsure about the meaning of a word, Google Image Search it for added clarity.

5. Use Non-Verbal Communication

Don't underestimate the power of non-verbal communication when traveling in a foreign language. Smiling, gesturing, and using body language can go a long way in conveying your message. You can also use visual aids, such as maps or pictures, to help you communicate.

Body language

Use hand gestures, facial expressions, and body posture to convey meaning. For example, nodding your head can indicate agreement, while shaking your head can indicate disagreement or confusion.

Pointing

Use your fingers or your eyes to point to objects or places. This can be especially helpful when trying to ask for directions or order food in a restaurant.

Visual aids

Use pictures, maps, and diagrams to help you communicate. For example, if you're trying to order food, you could use pictures in a menu or point to pictures on your phone to show what you want to order.

Be Aware Of Non-Verbal Cultural Differences

It is important to be aware of non-verbal communication cues that may be different from those in your home country. Here are some things to be aware of:

- Gestures can vary widely between cultures and may have different meanings than you're used to. For example, the "OK" sign (thumb and forefinger forming a circle) is considered offensive in some countries, while nodding your head up and down may mean "no" in some cultures.
- In some cultures, making direct eye contact is seen as a sign of respect and engagement, while in others it can be seen as confrontational or disrespectful. It's important to observe how locals behave and adjust your own behavior accordingly.
- The amount of personal space that people prefer can vary widely between cultures. In some countries, people may stand closer together than you're used to, while in others they may prefer more distance. Be aware of how close people are standing and adjust your own behavior accordingly.
- The tone of voice used in communication can convey a lot of information, including mood, attitude, and emphasis. In some cultures, a raised voice may indicate excitement or enthusiasm, while in others it may be seen as aggressive or confrontational.

6. Immerse Yourself In The Language

One of the best ways to learn a language is to immerse yourself in it. Take advantage of opportunities to practice your language skills, such as ordering food in a local restaurant or striking up a conversation with a shopkeeper. Attend cultural events and festivals, and try to speak with locals as much as possible.

Stay with a host family or in a homestay: This is a great way to experience local culture and practice your language skills in a natural setting. Your host family can help you with language learning and also introduce you to local customs and traditions.

Explore the city and engage with locals: Make an effort to interact with locals as much as possible, whether it's ordering food at a restaurant, chatting with shopkeepers, or asking for directions. This will give you an opportunity to practice your language skills in real-life situations and learn about the local culture.

Watch TV shows and movies in the target language: Watching local TV shows and movies can help you learn new vocabulary and phrases, and also expose you to the local culture.

Read books, newspapers, and magazines in the target language: Reading local publications in the target language can help you improve your reading and comprehension skills, as well as gain insight into the local culture.

Don't Be Afraid To Make Mistakes!

Making mistakes is a natural part of the language learning process, so don't be too hard on yourself if you don't get everything right the first time.

- It can be tempting to stick to speaking your native language when you're surrounded by unfamiliar language, but this can hinder your progress. Make an effort to speak the foreign language as much as possible, even if it feels uncomfortable at first.
- Language learning can be a challenging and frustrating process at times, but don't give up too easily. Keep practicing and seeking out new opportunities to use the language, and you'll see progress over time.

Cheers! And enjoy your adventure!

Psst! Check out how to say 'Cheers!' in 14 different languages around the world [here!](#)

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