



# The 9 Essential Questions For Finding the Perfect Language Tutor



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## **The 9 Essential Questions For Finding the Perfect Language Tutor**

Finding a competent language tutor, let alone an outstanding one, can often be more challenging than one might think. Many tutors lack the necessary experience and qualifications, and in worst cases, even fluency in the language being taught.

Unfortunately, this is not always so easy to judge, particularly if you are not very advanced in the language you are intending to study.

When assessing a prospective language tutor, therefore, it is very important to know exactly what to look for, and *especially* important to know what kind of things to avoid. Without this knowledge, you risk wasting your money, and perhaps even more importantly, your time.

From our experience, many students can quite often choose a tutor based on the wrong reasons, only to find out near or during exam time – when it is too late – that they have made the wrong choice.

To help find someone who will produce the best possible results for you therefore, we have put together this invaluable guide to choosing a tutor. It includes a list of the nine most important questions to ask when interviewing a candidate, and will ensure that you make the best possible choice for your requirements.

By following this advice closely you will be sure to find a great tutor that will help you achieve top marks in your studies.

When looking for a new tutor, it is naturally very important that you know all the necessary facts about the person prior to hiring them. After all, you will be placing a lot of trust in them that will affect your future academic success.

Whenever evaluating a prospective tutor therefore, you should never let them make you feel as though you are being rude or picky by questioning their qualifications. Always remember that you are the customer, and you have a right to know exactly what you are paying for.

Here, then, are the 9 essential questions you need to ask to help you find the perfect language tutor:

## **1. How Did the Tutor Learn the Language Being Taught?**

It is important to understand that when learning any foreign or second language, there is always a big difference between what is learned from books or in the classroom, and how the language is actually spoken in the real world. This is especially true of Japanese and Chinese, which are so closely tied up in their respective country's culture.

It is not truly possible therefore, for any tutor to have a strong command of Japanese or Chinese without having lived in Japan or China for a considerable period of time. Their pronunciation will generally sound awkward, their expressions will often not be totally appropriate, and their speech will sound obviously irregular to any native person. Of course, these limitations will then be passed on to each of their students.

If you were to ask a reasonably well-educated native English-speaking person a question about a particular English phrase or expression, for example, they should be able to explain details to you such as its exact meaning, how it differs from similar expressions, typical situations in which it can be used appropriately, the subtleties and nuances of its meaning, and so on.

A textbook- or classroom-educated teacher, on the other hand, will not have the ability to do this. They will only be capable of regurgitating materials they have studied in the past, which is of course not what you wish to pay for.

It is most important to the quality of the language you are being taught, therefore, that you preferably choose a tutor who is a native of that country, or alternatively, one who has lived there for at very least five years. For complex, culture-based languages such as Japanese or Chinese, you should insist on a minimum of ten years.

In this way, you will be assured of being taught by someone who is truly familiar with the language and its usage, and who can teach you excellent pronunciation and conversational usage as well.

## **2. What Experience Does the Tutor Have?**

You should choose a tutor who has at very least five years' experience in teaching the language at your level you require, preferably with some of this time spent working as a tutor. There are numerous factors that go into successfully teaching students, many of which can only be developed over time with experience.

Remember, just because someone is knowledgeable on a particular topic, it does not necessarily make them a good teacher of that topic. Knowing and teaching are two very different disciplines.

Bear in mind that it *is* possible to encounter a great tutor with very little experience, or a miserable tutor with many years of experience. Often times it comes down to the tutor's personality, temperament, and level of dedication. Either way, however, the amount of experience a tutor has is usually a good starting point in assessing how good he or she is.

Also understand that a tutor with even ten years' experience in teaching primary school students would not be suitable for a university student. Be sure to confirm that the tutor's experience is relevant to your situation. If you wish to study a language at extension level, for example, then enquire about the tutor's experience and background in teaching at that level.

One final but *very* important point – *always* avoid tutors who hesitate or refuse to discuss their previous experience. Often tutors with an inadequate background will become defensive and act as though their skills are beyond question.

As I mentioned earlier, you are the customer and you have a right to know what you are paying for. You deserve an honest and accurate answer to this question, and there are no valid reasons for any tutor not to provide one.

### **3. How Familiar is the Tutor With Your Curriculum?**

It is absolutely crucial to your academic success that your tutor be totally familiar with your subject curriculum. If not, you will inevitably miss out on important material that is relevant to your studies.

This may seem an obvious point, but alarmingly, there are numerous overseas tutors currently teaching in Sydney who are unfortunately unfamiliar with the NSW curricula. Some of these even go as far as teaching directly from overseas texts.

When teaching a foreign language, there are three general areas that your tutor should cover effectively.

Firstly, they should ensure that you know the basics of the language. This includes grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, etc., across all of the four language disciplines: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Of course, this is a large part of what you learn at school, and it can often also be learned quite effectively from books and tapes. Fortunately, most tutors are quite capable of covering this point reasonably well.

Secondly, your tutor should teach you to perfect your pronunciation and general speaking quality. This was covered earlier in Question 1.

And thirdly, it is crucial that your tutor ensures you achieve a high academic grade in your studies. This can only be achieved by being very familiar with your curriculum and covering specifically what is relevant to your coursework. Also, your tutor should be able to indicate exactly what to expect in exams, and to instruct you on what and how to prepare for them in order to achieve high marks.

For a student aiming at high academic grades, hiring a tutor that is not capable of providing all these points would be an unfortunate waste of time and money. Be absolutely sure therefore, that your tutor knows exactly what to cover for the coursework and exams of your level of study before hiring him or her.

#### **4. What Qualifications Does the Tutor Have?**

Knowledge of the subject matter alone does not guarantee that a tutor will have the ability to successfully teach students. There are many requirements to consider when tutoring a student, to ensure that they learn as quickly and completely as possible.

Tutors must know how to structure and deliver lessons for each individual student, how to detect and correct your weaknesses, how to maximise your memory of the material, how to motivate you to learn, and so on.

One of the best ways to ensure that a tutor will be able to perform all these tasks effectively is to choose one who is a qualified teacher. A tutor who has a teaching qualification will have been trained in all the necessary aspects of making their students learn effectively.

Alternatively, an unqualified tutor can sometimes become equally effective through experience and/or under the training and guidance of a qualified, experienced teacher.

When selecting a tutor therefore, while it is often best to start with a qualified teacher, you should also weigh up the tutor's past teaching or tutoring experience and on-the-job training as well.

Always bear in mind that being a native of a particular country does not necessarily guarantee a tutor will be an effective teacher of that country's language. Be very wary therefore, of visitors to Australia on a working holiday who undertake tutoring of their native language. They will usually prove to be very poor tutors since they will very rarely possess any teaching qualifications or skills.

Even less desirable still are foreign language tutors who may have studied the language abroad for a year or two, and then advertise the fact that they have lived there. Again, these individuals will rarely possess any teaching qualifications or skills, and in addition will also lack a strong command of the language.

Finally, be sure to avoid tutors who refuse to discuss what qualifications they have or don't have. As was discussed earlier, you have a right to know, and defensiveness and secrecy can only be signs that something is amiss.

## **5. Does the Tutor Teach Full-Time?**

A tutor who teaches and/or tutors full-time will usually be preferable to someone who is simply tutoring as a means of extra income, for several reasons.

Generally speaking, a full-time tutor is more likely to be better-prepared and more reliable, since they will often take their occupation more seriously and therefore make more effort to maintain a high level of professionalism and proficiency.

One group to be particularly wary of when choosing a tutor is university students. Some university students decide to take on tutoring as a convenient part-time source of income, especially after achieving a high HSC grade in a particular high-school language subject.

These tutors are neither qualified teachers, nor do they have anywhere near the necessary experience or level of proficiency to be teaching other students. Some will actually be taking lessons from a genuine tutor themselves, while at the same time earning money by tutoring others.

In addition, because of the study commitments and the young age of most university students, their students will often times take a low priority – behind that of their studies, exams, and social engagements.



## **6. How Does the Tutor Structure their Lessons?**

It is very important that your tutor firstly covers each of the four main language disciplines mentioned earlier – reading, writing, speaking and listening, including vocabulary and grammar, in each lesson taught.

Some tutors who are not particularly fluent in the language will tend to focus excessively on grammar and writing characters, rather than ensuring that their students are proficient in all of the language disciplines.

The reason for this is that these tutors themselves are not competent speakers of the language and have difficulty with vocabulary and sentence structure in their writing. They therefore take the easy option of teaching the more simple components of the language that can be found in many books.

Another very important point to consider is how the tutor teaches. Ideally, avoid lazy tutors who teach in a “classroom style”, where you are simply told what to say, read or write, or given printed notes to study on your own.

A major benefit of personalised tutoring is to maximise student interaction, to accelerate your learning. This is what makes good tutoring lessons so effective. By promoting student participation in the lessons, a good tutor will not only ensure that you get the most from your lessons, but that you will enjoy learning the material, rather than making it a painful, boring process. And this, of course, will motivate you and make it easier for you to progress.

You should be able to get a reasonably good idea of how a prospective language tutor structures their lessons, simply by talking to them. Of course, you will only get the full picture about your chosen tutor once you have actually experienced a few of their lessons.

Do not be afraid to quit from your tutor after several lessons if you feel that he or she is not what you expected. A good tutor will actually allow you to take a lesson or two with them before having to commit to joining them for an extended period such as a term or a year.

There is no point persevering in a situation that is clearly not ideal for your needs or not working for you for any reason while other, more promising opportunities are available. Most professional tutors will understand this and allow you some flexibility before asking for a commitment.

## **7. How Many Hours of Tutoring Will You Need?**

There is no right or wrong answer to this question, since every student and situation is different. You should understand, however, that while a tutor can advise you of their opinion, it should be *your* decision in the end.

A good tutor will give you an honest assessment of your level of proficiency in the subject during your first lesson, and point out your main strengths and weaknesses. They will then make a recommendation about how many hours of tutoring per week would be necessary in order to achieve your goals, and therefore provide you with the best possible value for your money.

It is in your best interests to avoid tutors who try to pressure you into being tutored for more hours per week than you feel are necessary, or that you feel comfortable with. A tutor who insists on too many hours per week, especially before even evaluating you, should be sounding alarm bells.

If you are in any doubt, get more opinions. You will get a far clearer picture of your situation and of what is possible for you by getting the perspective of several tutors.

All too often, poor tutors recommend excessive tutoring hours simply to maximise their profits, or to compensate for their ineffective teaching methods and abilities. You are always far better off with a tutor who can produce superior results for you in a shorter time frame.

## **8. What Language Does the Tutor Teach in?**

There are numerous tutors available that you will no doubt encounter, who cater specifically to students whose first language is not English. They often make the fact that they teach in a given foreign language (not the language being taught) one of their primary selling points.

These tutors therefore each target a certain racial group, such as Korean, Chinese, or Indian, for example, within the community.

While it may feel very comfortable to be taught a language in your own native tongue, there is a very important point to consider. And that is that since 2001, the Department of Education has been progressively increasing the emphasis on English in second language HSC exams.

For example, the 2-Unit Continuers Japanese HSC exam Listening and Reading components, which together make up 65% of the exam score, currently involve analysing Japanese passages in English. This is also the case for the 3-Unit Extension Japanese HSC exam Reading component, which makes up 30% of the exam score.

This trend is slowly becoming more significant for all second-language HSC exams.

As a result, language tutors who are unable to adequately prepare their students for the HSC exams. Students will simply fail to develop the necessary skills in these essential areas and their exam results will seriously suffer.

It is therefore essential that your tutor is able to teach and speak proficiently in both the language being taught, as well as in English.

Look for a language tutor, therefore, who is able to teach the required components in English, but who also takes every opportunity to speak the language being taught during the lessons.

In fact, a good tutor will conduct most of the lesson in the language being taught, so that you can quickly become comfortable with speaking and listening. This, of course, is a huge benefit that helps you learn the language so much faster. This is essentially a free bonus to your education which costs neither you nor the tutor any extra time.

## **9. What is the Tutor's Attitude Like?**

You'll find your whole learning experience, both in terms of enjoyment and results, so much more pleasant with a tutor who is positive, open and friendly. Tutors who tend to be authoritative or aggressive may project an image of efficiency and discipline on the surface, but in reality will generally be less effective in motivating you to your highest possible potential.

A friendly, yet professional teacher, on the other hand, will provide more interesting and more educational lessons, making learning of the language a pleasure for you. This, in turn, will drive you to learn faster and achieve better grades.

### **Conclusion**

As you can see, then, there are quite a number of important points that you need to be sure about before deciding upon a suitable language tutor.

To complicate matters further, there is a whole variety of non-qualified, non-professional individuals who label themselves as tutors, so you need to be especially careful about checking the background of anyone who you are intending to hire.

Many try to attract students by offering unusually cheap rates. Like everything else, however, always bear in mind that you only get what you pay for.

Follow this guide closely and you're sure to find a good tutor that will provide great value for your money. Your knowledge will improve greatly, as will your academic grades!

We invite you to pass this guide on to any friends and family members who are also looking for a good language tutor, so that they, too, can make the best possible choice of tutor for their needs.

Good luck, and happy learning!

Gloria Kaneko.

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