

THE ART OF **LIVING**

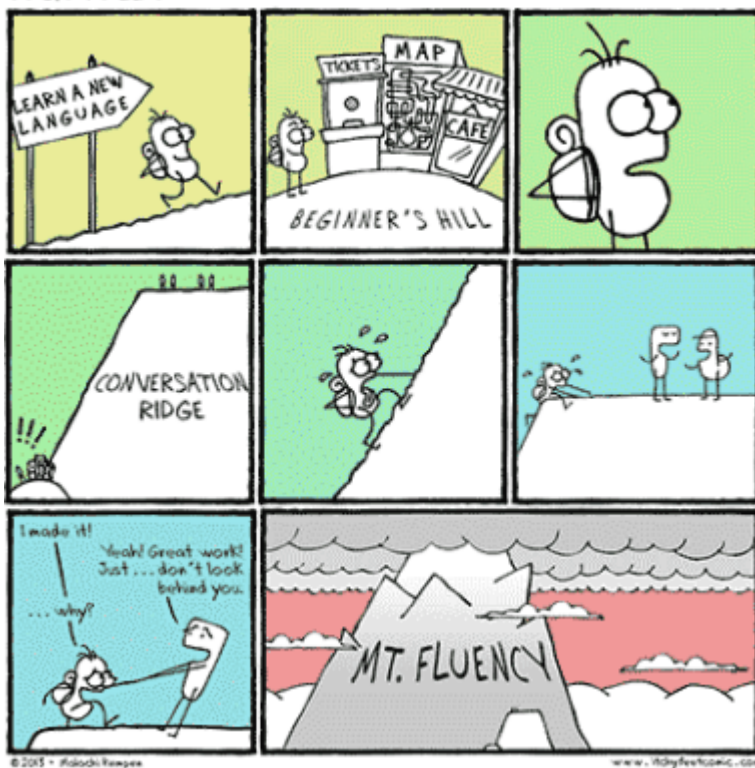
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The Best Way To Learn A Language (The Ultimate Free Language Learning Guide)

33 MINUTE READ

ITCHY FEET

**Perfect for you if:**

- You're looking for the best way to learn a language fast.
- You're already learning a new language but want to speed it up.
- You think English is all you need or you're "not a language person".

Looking for the best way to learn a language? Want to learn faster? You're in the right place.

Learning a new language is one of life's most misunderstood challenges. It is also one of its most rewarding. A new language is a gatekeeper to new people, places, knowledge and experiences. It is a passport to a country that we didn't even know existed.

I've spent most of my life learning languages – either because I had to or because I wanted to. I was raised bilingual (English/French) and studied French, Latin and ancient Greek until I was 16. In the last few years, I've raised German to fluency and Mandarin, Russian and Spanish to somewhere between fluency and conversational.

This guide doesn't claim to be the only way to learn a language. But it's the best way to learn a language that I know of. It's a collection of my own experiences and mistakes, plus a few pointers and tools. It's all the things, in short, that I wish I'd known about much earlier. I hope you find something in it that gives you the confidence or push to start or accelerate your own language learning journey.

P.s., You can now get this guide as a free pdf eBook with extra vocab lists, lesson tools and SRS tips as part of our [FREE Language Learning Pack!](#)

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3 FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

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There are three factors that determine language learning success: **Mindset**, **Motivation** and **Practice**. I'll lay out some practical tips for each in this guide but for now I'll define what I mean.

Mindset

The most important mindset to develop is that anyone can learn a second language. Don't believe me? Ask anyone in Germany under 25 and they'll tell you (in perfect English). Still sceptical? Take my word for now that '[language people](#)' are not born, they are created.

The second most important mindset is that **making mistakes is essential to learning**. I once called my Chinese homestay family's dog a prostitute for an entire evening. I also remarked to a group of Germans that my face, after a run, was covered in poo (instead of sweat). If you want to learn a language you are going to need to make a lot of mistakes. And that's more than ok it's essential!

Motivation

Language learning isn't quick and it isn't easy. There will be ups and downs. Highs and lows. Frustrations and breakthroughs. After the initial rush of quick progress comes the long slog to fluency and mastery. **Learning a language requires persistence. Motivation is its fuel.**

Practice

Finally, it helps to remember that language learning is a skill. Like all skills, **progress is a factor of quantity of time and quality of practice.** There are no magic shortcuts. You wouldn't expect to jam fluently on a guitar after three weeks (or even three months) – don't expect to learn a language any faster.

The role of good training tools and strategies is not to cheat the system. It's to avoid the journey taking longer than is necessary.

THE ANATOMY OF LANGUAGE

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All languages have the same basic structure. Knowing it will help throughout this guide and the rest of your learning journey.

Each language breaks down into three **theoretical skills**:

- Pronunciation
- Grammar
- Vocabulary

The relative difficulty of each theoretical skill varies from language to language. Mandarin grammar is much easier than Russian grammar. Pronunciation and vocabulary are a different story. For more on relative language difficulty [see the appendix](#).

There are also four **practical skills**:

- Speaking
- Listening
- Reading
- Writing

Understanding (listening, reading) is easier than creating (speaking, writing). The amount of time you'll need to put into each practical skill will vary by both language and [personal goals](#).

SETTING LANGUAGE LEARNING GOALS

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A clear vision and defined goals will keep you on track and motivated during the hard parts of your language learning journey.

Decide on a vision

Take out a pen and paper and ask yourself why ***you*** are learning ***this*** language. Is it for love? Out of necessity? For an upcoming trip?

Now consider the four practical language skills. What level do you need to reach in each to make this vision a reality? The definitions given by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) may help. You can find these [in the appendix](#).

Make a plan

Now we have a rough idea of where we need to get to (and why) let's make those goals more concrete. To do this we need to make them SMART (Simple, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic and Time Bound). Ask yourself "what specific thing can I do/achieve to show that I have reached the level I am aiming for?".

Some examples of SMART goals might include:

- I make a 15-minute speech to 10 people by dd.mm.yy,
- I read 5 books cover to cover by dd.mm.yy; or
- I write an article for a local paper / journal by dd.mm.yy

- I pass XXX exam by dd.mm.yy

N.B., Passing an exam is (on its own) a terrible reason for learning a language. But in the context of a broader motivation exams can be a part of a very SMART combination.

Once we've set a clear goal it's time to work backwards from it and determine **what** needs to happen **when** to get us there. What are the main barriers we face? Why aren't we already at our goal? What/who do we know that can help us get there faster?

If the goals we've set are more than 3 months away it can be helpful to break them down into shorter milestones. The only way to eat an elephant is piece by piece.

Get it done

Goals give us our "why" – they are a powerful source of motivation. But sometimes they can feel so daunting that we end up procrastinating to avoid them.

When this happens, here are two great life hacks that can help us get back on track.

First: ask "What is the very next action I can take to make some progress towards this goal?". It could be looking at a single website, asking a question or downloading a new app. Keep it small, write it down now, tick it off. Rinse and repeat. Sometimes all it takes to regain momentum is a little push.

Second: switch your focus to process instead of product. Commit to making whatever progress you can in the next 25 minutes. Then have a 5-minute break. Then repeat. Process goals are a great way to bring us back to the present moment and break big goals into manageable chunks (see [the Pomodoro Technique](#)).

PRACTICAL TOOLS AND TIPS

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The single most valuable tip I can share with you is to [learn how to learn](#). There are many [fantastic language learning guides and books](#) out there. Read some. A small time investment up front could save you years of frustration down the line.

In the meantime, here are some general tips on:

- [Where to focus your time and energy](#),
- [Spaced Repetition Systems \(SRSs\)](#); and
- [More Useful Websites and Tools](#)

As well as specific tips on:

1. [Pronunciation](#)
2. [Grammar](#)

3. Vocabulary

4. Speaking

5. Listening

6. Reading

7. Writing

Where to focus your time and energy

Focus 1: Speak from the very first day. One-on-one with a local is preferable ([see below](#) for tips). Book your first lesson even if you only know 5 words.

Speaking early helps you progress faster and keeps you motivated. One of the greatest things about languages are the people you meet and new friends you make along the way.

Focus 2: Pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Early focus here will pay big dividends later on. Pronunciation, in particular, is very difficult to reverse and correct once in place.

Focus 3: The remaining three practical skills: listening, reading, writing. As you advance it is more interesting (and fun) to learn a language as naturally as possible. Which of these you focus on will depend on your goals and preferences.

Start shifting time to these practical skills when your vocabulary hits the ~1,000 word mark. By this time you should also have a good few weeks or months of speaking and grammar

under your belt.

N.B., No matter what level, speaking and vocabulary learning should always stay an important part of language learning.

Spaced Repetition Systems (SRSs)

Spaced Repetition Systems (SRSs) are hands down **the quickest way to learn almost anything and make it stick**.

The premise is simple. Imagine a basic paper flashcard with a question on one side and an answer on the other. It turns out that that the perfect time to review that flash card is the exact moment you're about to forget it. SRSs handle this scheduling for you but for thousands of flashcards at a time. Unlike paper, they also let you include sound files, photos or even movies on the flashcards you create.

My personal favourite SRS is **Anki** – it's free and the algorithm is excellent. Its customisability means you can use it to learn almost anything fast – from science to history of art. **Gabriel Wyner's "Fluent Forever"** is my go-to on using Anki to learn languages.

There are plenty of alternative systems out there that are well built and user-friendly. These include **Rosetta Stone**, **Memrise** and **Duolingo**. In my opinion, Rosetta Stone doesn't offer value for money. The latter two are great free options for beginners or dipping a toe into a new language. In the long run, they lack the power and flexibility of Anki that will become important to you as you advance.

More Useful Websites and Tools

Aside from Anki (and other SRSs) there are hundreds of great language learning websites, apps and tools on the internet. Many are general, some of them are language specific. Amazingly, most of them are totally free.

Here is a shortlist of the non-language-specific tools which I use on an almost daily basis. Know of another great tool? Suggest it in the comments below. I may have tried it and opted for something else but the chances are I may not know about it!

iTalki – The single best place to find a one-on-one language teacher online at the fraction of the cost of a language school. Benefits include:

- Free membership
- Three levels of teaching: language partner (free), community and professional
- Quick and simple search to find a user rated teacher by location, gender etc...
- Simple scheduling system
- No currency issues
- Free native speaker corrections to any writing you upload within ~48h

Forvo – An amazing free repository of recordings by native speakers for almost any word in any language. If they don't have what you're looking for you can request it. A member of

the community will usually fill the gap within 48h. Almost every flash card I create contains one or more Forvo recordings.

Rhinospike – Like Forvo but aimed at on-demand requests for longer texts and passages. You can speed up the process by recording someone else's request for them. Also free.

WavePad – Mac only. Superb for breaking up long audio files into smaller chunks. The home version of the software is free to use.

Skype – Still the easiest and most common platform for online conversations. Perfect for language e-lessons. Google will help you find a plugin to record your sessions.

Google Images – An amazing insight into the collective visual consciousness of the internet. Search on the Google images that's local to your target language for extra insights.

YouTube – Great for music, T.V., programs and even grammar explanation videos. Other languages (especially Mandarin) may offer other alternatives.

Spotify – Perfect for creating foreign language music playlists and taking them on the go (premium version only).

Google Translate – Responsible for hilarious sign, t-shirt and restaurant mis-translations the world over. Perfect for a quick check but use with caution.

1. Pronunciation

In theory

Pronunciation is an important part of sounding like a local (in Mandarin, it's essential to even get by). In any case, once learned, pronunciation is hard to change. This is one reason an upfront investment is very worthwhile.

Pronunciation begins with phonemes – the distinct units of sound that distinguish words. English has 44 phonemes, for example, p, b, d, and t in the words pad, pat, bad, and bat. Other languages have their own sets (Hawai'in has 13 whilst Taa has 120!) and the degree of overlap between them varies.

As babies we can hear the full possible range of phonemes. The problem is that as children we forget to hear the phonemes that aren't in the languages we speak. It's actually less like forgetting and more like specialisation. This lets us differentiate the sounds of these languages even under heavy distortion.

It is very difficult to pronounce words if you can't hear the sounds that create them. It also makes it harder to hear and memorise them. This is why relearning phonemes helps both pronunciation and speeds up learning.

In practice

Here are some ways to practice phoneme recognition and pronunciation:

- **Practice phoneme recognition through minimal pair differentiation.** I use **Fluent-Forever's pronunciation trainers** combined with Anki.
- **Mimic and get feedback from native speakers.** Ask your teacher or your friends. Practice copying your favourite film or T.V., personality.
- **Record yourself and compare it with native recordings** (see **Forvo**). Adjust and repeat.
- **Learn to sing in your shower or through private lessons.** This also provides a great insight into a language's culture and is an amazing way to impress new friends! **YouTube**, **Spotify** or your favourite music streaming service are perfect for this.
- **Use back-chaining to tackle difficult words.** When learning to pronounce a new word, start with the last syllable and work backwards. Try it – this tip is worth its weight in gold.
- **Avoid group classes.** In a group class of 4 people (plus a teacher) you spend ~80% of the time hearing incorrect pronunciation. See **speaking** tips for more information.

2. Grammar

In theory

Grammar is the framework supporting an entire language. It is the key to turning 1,000 words into 100,000 sentences. It unlocks whole new ways of self-expression in every next

conversation. As a means to an end, grammar is not only essential, it can even be exciting (you may have to trust me on that)!

Sadly, teachers with many students have no choice but to focus on the theoretical parts of language. The problem is that, in isolation, grammar is a soul-destroying way to learn a language. This is one reason why classrooms are such terrible places to learn them.

One of the reasons that grammar is so daunting to tackle is that **it is almost a language in itself**. From prepositions, cases and tenses to aspects, pronouns and participles – it's easy to get lost. The important thing to remember is that everyone goes through this double learning curve – it's OK to be confused!

The good news is that, once learned, grammar turns out to have only a few, simple concepts. What's more, these concepts are mostly consistent between languages. This is one of the reasons that picking up a third or fourth language is often easier than mastering a second.

In practice

There are few better ways to make quick progress in a language than starting with a good grammar book. Here are a few tips for giving grammar a second chance:

- **Buy a good grammar book.** Don't buy the biggest grammar book you can find. Instead, start with one specific to your language level and upgrade as you go along. A

good book will stay practical, introduce you to useful vocabulary and be full of exercises. Ask the internet or your teacher for language-specific recommendations.

- **Work through the grammar book.** Add new structures and vocabulary to your SRS.
- **Do the exercises given in each chapter.** Add any that you get wrong to your SRS.
- **Be patient with yourself.** Starting off with grammar means learning two languages in parallel for a while!
- **Read and write as often as possible.** Reading will expose you to thousands of natural language grammar examples. Writing will help you be sure you've internalised all the grammatical principles.

N.b., applications like **Duolingo** are not a one-stop shop. They are great for vocabulary but terrible for grammar. Nothing beats a good grammar book.

3. Vocabulary

Words are the building blocks of language and it always pays to invest time in expanding your vocabulary.

As you start out, you'll come across many new words in your lessons and grammar book. As you improve, listening and reading will also become important sources of new words. Here are some tips when adding them to your SRS:

- **Avoid translations by using pictures wherever you can.** Avoid the fluency destroying habit of translating between languages in your head. Instead, link words to mental images and concepts. Use Google Image in the target language (e.g., Google.ru for Russian).
- **Learn words as part of phrases or sentences** to strengthen connections between words. Many dictionaries will provide example sentences for a given word.
- **Include a recording from a native speaker.** **Forvo** is a great place to find or request these for free.
- **Use definitions in the target language where pictures won't do.** Switch from a bilingual to a monolingual dictionary when able.
- **Learn adjectives as antonym pairs.** If you add 'big' to your SRS then also add 'small'.

It's important keep active in learning new vocabulary. As a beginner, being systematic in your approach will help fill any important gaps. Active learning becomes especially important when approaching day-to-day fluency. At this point it can be tempting to stick to what you know. This feels good but cripples further progress.

Here are some sources to keep you busy throughout your language learning:

- **Cognate lists.** Ask Google for yours. Cognates are words that are very similar between two languages. These lists can help you learn hundreds of words in a very

short time.

- **Glue words.** Common words that supercharge sentence building and are worth learning up front. [Here's my list.](#)
- **Frequency dictionaries/lists.** Googling some variation of '500 most common words in XXX' is a good place to start.
- **Thematic dictionaries/lists.** Perfect for drilling down into a particular topic. My favourite for European languages are the 'Using [French](#) / [German](#) / [Spanish](#) Vocabulary' series.
- **Vocabulary trainers.** For example [Glossika](#) which has 3,000 sentences (with native recordings) translated across many languages. This is great for practicing multiple languages at once.

One final tip that I've read about but never used is 'Labelling'. Put post it notes on every object in your house with its name in your target language. The only prerequisite to easy vocab learning is an understanding family or flat mate!

4. Speaking

Book your first language lesson the very first day you decide to learn a new language. Even if you only know 5 words. Speaking will keep you challenged. It will keep you motivated. It will make you new friends. It will teach you about culture. It will help you learn about great resources specific to your language.

The longer you put off speaking a language the longer it will take you to be able to speak it. This is true even if you've spent years studying grammar or watching TV shows in your target language.

This suggestion comes with two caveats:

- Never attend a group sessions.
- Never use a language school.

In a group lessons you will spend the majority of your time listening to other people's mistakes. With a language school you will pay up to 10 times what it would cost you to go direct. This is twice as true for third party immersion programs.

Learning a language online

These days it is both easy and affordable to find one-to-one tuition for any language online. One of the best services for this is the iTalki community.

I tend to use community teachers at a cost of 5 – 10 USD per hour. This works for my lifestyle and budget but there are great options on either side of this to suit any needs.

Tips for online language learning

Here are a few tips after learning five languages and spending hundreds of hours online:

Booking the sessions:

- **Interview as many teachers as you need to** until you find a few that feel 'right'. Book 30 minutes trial sessions for this.
- **Start with many 30 minute sessions.** They will exhaust you. Progress to fewer 60 minutes sessions as you improve.
- **Use many teachers.** Male and female, of various ages and from different regions. This will give you much broader exposure to all the nuances of a language.

During the sessions:

- **Stay in your target language.** At all times, even when it's frustrating. Replace teachers that switch to English.
- **Vary the lesson theme.** Avoid talking about the same things again and again. This feels good but is an illusion of confidence. Push yourself to discuss and role play new scenarios or themes.
- **Record and review the session audio.** Ask permission first. Pay attention to pronunciation and vocabulary.
- **Ask the teacher to type any new words or corrections during the session.** Then add them to your SRS.
- **Avoid video for >50% of your sessions.** This is harder but will make you a much better speaker in the long run.

- **Degrade the audio quality.** More advanced. I loop the sound of a busy train station in my ear during some lessons. This replicates the noisiness of real life situations.

Preparing for your first lesson:

- **Prepare an introductory script in your own language.** Translate it with Google and then use and correct it in your first session.
- **Use Google translate** to help you get your point across.
- **Ask lots of questions.** Most of my best language resources have come from my language teachers. You can also ask all sorts of personal / cultural questions you might otherwise be afraid to!
- **Don't worry about making mistakes!** Your teachers are there to help you not judge you.
- **Don't forget to have fun!**

Learning a language in person

It is very possible to become fluent in a language without ever visiting a country that speaks it. Not sure where to start? Here are a few real-world ideas to get you going wherever you are:

- **Attend language exchange events.** Look on Google, FaceBook, Couchsurfing or the events boards at language schools.

- **Attend cultural events.** Go to a Salsa or Italian cooking class. Look at the event calendar on a country's embassy website.
- **Eat in foreign restaurants** and strike up a conversation with the waiting staff there.
- **Host foreign guests at your home** via e.g., Couchsurfing or AirBnB.
- **Talk to strangers.** Asking someone where they're from in their own language is a great way to start a conversation.
- **Talk to yourself.** Label or describe everything around you. Keep a note of missing vocabulary to tackle when you get home.

And a few more for when you finally get to enjoy immersing yourself in the target country:

- **Practice in taxis.** This is one of the best ways to get cheap conversation practice from an eclectic mix of people.
- **Attend local Couch Surfing meet ups and hang outs.** Find them on the Couchsurfing website and app.
- **Stay with locals** via e.g., Couchsurfing or AirBnB.
- **Meet up with iTalki teachers or language exchange partners.** These experiences may turn out to be some of the most surprising and rewarding of your life.
- **Engineer real life scenarios.** Negotiate at the market but don't buy anything. Try buying a train a ticket then pretend you forgot your wallet etc...

Finally, here are two tips to make the most of these situations when you're in them:

- **Stay in your target language.** Avoid the strong temptation to switch to English. Be stubborn about staying in your target language if they do. This can be hard in places where many people speak English well but is worth the effort.
- **Pay attention to non-verbal cues.** *There's more to becoming a local than the way you speak.* Pay attention to cultural and non-verbal cues. How do people stand? dress? use facial expressions?

5. Listening

The advantage of listening is that you don't need to do anything with your hands. This makes it great for those times when you're running, driving or similarly engaged.

Speaking from day one means you've been getting plenty of listening practice in right from the start. Here are a few more ways to take your listening skills to the next level when you're solo:

- **(Language Learning) Podcasts** – usually free and interesting. You can also usually control playback speeds which is helpful!
- **Audiobooks** – with and without a companion physical book
- **TV shows** – with and then without subtitles (first translated then in target language)
- **Films** – as for TV Shows. Does anyone else remember *Muzzy*?

- **News recordings** – slowed then full speed.
- **Music** – read the lyrics before hand and/or during if you can
- **Custom recordings** – see [Rhinospike](#)
- **Audio only/mainly language courses** – like [The Michael Thomas Method](#) (not my favourite)

Many of the best sources are language specific – ask your teachers, friends and Google for help finding them.

To really give your brain a stretch try the above but with the following twists:

- **Degrade the audio.** Reduce the quality of the sound file or play ambient background noise (like a busy street or train station) while you're listening.
- **Summarise or paraphrase** (verbal/written) what you've heard once you're done listening. Discuss it with or explain it to a friend or the iTalki community.
- **Transcribe** what you're hearing as you hear it – this is also a great way to practice writing.

N.B., Some people will claim to be able to teach you a language subconsciously (e.g., during sleep). These methods are not worth the time or money invested in them. [Learning requires focus, energy and time](#) – if it feels laughably easy, you're not learning.

6. Reading

As you hit the thousand word vocabulary mark it's time to start reading in your target language. Here are just a few reasons why reading is my favourite approach for natural language acquisition:

- **Passive exposure to thousands of grammar structures**
- **Passive exposure to new and old vocabulary** – You learn ~600 new words per book. Not to mention the common words you'll be revising.
- **Insight into your target language's history and culture** – especially its turns of phrase and idioms.
- **Learning (about something else) whilst you learn** – two birds with one stone!
- **The chance to discover new authors and rediscovering old ones**
- **A more faithful retelling of a story than any translation**

I love a paper book but I'm going to let you in on a secret: **for reading in a foreign language Kindles are a game changer**. Why? **The simple tap-to-translate dictionary system**. That and you can buy and carry a thousand books in almost any language right in your pocket. (I'm sure other eReaders might also work I just haven't tried them).

Whether you opt for an eReader or paper book the next question is what to read. My recommendation is to **start with familiar stories, translated into your target language**.

For example, I always start with the first three Harry Potter books. Why? Because they're easy to read and I know the story. This added context makes it much easier to work out what's going on if(/when) I get stuck!

The first page might take you 6 hours to read, but the second will take 4 hours, the third 2 hours and so on. Stick with it. Before you know it you'll be powering through and supercharging your language learning.

As soon as you are able, move on to easy books written in your target language. This not only improves your language skills but also exposes you to your target culture. I've discovered wonderful authors that are often unknown to English speakers. Famous authors translated into English are even more wonderful in their own language. iTalki teachers, friends and Google are great ways to find recommendations for these.

7. Writing

When we listen and read it can be easy to fool ourselves in to believing we know how a language works. When we speak we usually make and get away with a litany of errors, even in our native language. Writing is a very different story.

When we write, it forces our language knowledge out into the open. It checks mercilessly that we've internalised its grammar rules and exceptions. This makes writing the most challenging of the seven components of language.

As a result, it can be tempting to ‘forget’ to make time for writing and focus on the other six aspects. Don’t do it. Practicing writing is hard but there is no better way to take your language skills to the next level.

Here’s a simple four step process to help get started with self-directed writing:

- **Write little and often** – try five minutes of writing twice a day. This is better than putting 10 minutes of writing off for a week.
- **Start on paper** – this forces us to check our spelling and grammar without the help of modern technology. Try to write from your head and not to get sidetracked looking things up.
- **Digitise and correct your writing** – show your writing to a friend or upload it to the free correction services at iTalki or Lang-8. Store any spelling or grammar errors in your SRS.
- **Re-write the corrected text on paper again.** This perfect version locks corrections down in your head.

Often one of the biggest barriers to writing can be not knowing what to write about. You don’t need to compose War and Peace. Instead, why not write:

- **About your day** – either a journal of what you did or your reflections on what went on. Worried that your day sounds boring? Make something up!
- **A summary or opinion** of a film, book or article that you’ve seen or read recently

- **A response to someone else's questions or writing**

Writing doesn't always have to be public. That said, language is all about communication so why not try writing in some of the following places:

- **Language Learning Communities.** iTalki and Lang-8 are great examples of communities organised around language learning.
- **Messaging apps.** Tandem is an amazing app that's built for language learning. Otherwise, get tapping on WhatsApp, WeiXin, iMessage or even your favourite dating app.
- **Blogs and Forums.** These are great place to write about any interests you have, from sports to travelling. Why not post some reviews on TripAdvisor?
- **Social Media.** Even FaceBook and Instagram can become good places to practice your new language.
- **Email.** Some of my best and most rewarding (reading and) writing takes place in emails with friends from around the world.

Writing in a foreign language can feel daunting. Writing online even more so. But remember, it's not only OK to make mistakes – it's a critical part of the language learning process.

ADVANCED TIPS

Becoming a local

There is more to being mistaken for a local than speaking the language with perfect pronunciation. Body language, dress and other non-verbal queues are also important.

When you have the opportunity to visit a country take a few minutes to look at the people around you:

- What clothes do they wear?
- What facial expressions do they have as they speak?
- What distance do they stand from other speakers?
- What are they doing with their hands?
- How do they handle personal grooming and hairstyles?
- What postures do they assume when standing or sitting?
- How much eye contact do they make?
- What other unique features make them different from me?

Once you've taken a few notes, make a game of trying to emulate the local crowd! Few moments are more satisfying than being mistaken by a local for one of their own.

Exam Preparation

Passing an exam is (by itself) a terrible reason to learn a language. Yet, as part of a broader strategy, they can be very useful. First, booking an exam is a great SMART goal. It gives you a concrete milestone to aim for and puts a bit of fear in your belly. Second, it can force you out of your comfort zone and patch up any holes in your knowledge.

Nailing exams is 50% what you know (see [Learning How to Learn](#)), 40% familiarity with the paper and 10% luck. Familiarity with the paper is the most overlooked of these three.

Here are a few tips to make sure you know what's coming and how to show your best self on the day:

- **Buy exam preparation guides.** Inside you'll find break downs of the papers, perfect answers as well as tips and common pitfalls. They also often come with 3 – 4 practice papers and an answer book. There are usually one or two popular/official providers. These things are worth their weight in gold. Ask your teacher, Google or the exam board for advice here.
- **Find exam specific vocabulary lists.** Sometimes exam boards are explicit about exactly what vocabulary you must know. Otherwise make sure to note and add any new vocabulary from exam guides and past papers to your SRS.
- **Do at least 4 – 8 practice papers.** The more the better. As well as the preparation guides look on the examiner's official website for past papers. Start these at least a

month in advance and increase the intensity as you approach the exam day. Your teacher and Google can help you find these.

- **Do half your practice papers under exam conditions.** This will tell you where you have a tendency to get stuck and need more work. It will also reduce stress on the day by upfronting it earlier in the process.
- **Get advice from other language learners.** Ask a few people who have already taken the paper for tips and tricks. How did they prepare? What surprised them on the day? The iTalki community is a great place for this.
- **Get a good night of sleep.** A good night of rest is always worth more than squeezing in one last minute practice paper.

Usually the exam will test you on each of the four practical skills discussed above. Here are some tips on preparing for each:

- **Speaking.** Schedule practice oral exams with your (iTalki) teacher. Record yourself. Ask for feedback. This will feel stressful but you'll be grateful for it later.
- **Listening.** If you can't find recordings, ask your (iTalki) teacher to record the transcripts for you.
- **Reading.** Usually the easiest to practice – lots of past papers and noting of any missing vocabulary will do the trick.

- **Writing:** Best practiced under exam conditions (time bound, no looking up). Write by hand if that's what you'll need to do on the day. Once done, follow the process outlined in the [writing](#) section to learn from your mistakes.

And remember, unless you're at school, there are no consequences for passing or failing. Instead, exams are a great way to get valuable, external feedback on any gaps in your knowledge. You will learn much more from average marks on difficult exams than a perfect mark on an exam that's far too easy.

FURTHER READING

[Contents](#) >

I've read many, many books on language learning. These are the only three that I recommend to friends taking on a new language. If you read them you'll recognise many of these author's tips repurposed in this article:

“Fluent in Three Months”, Benny Lewis: This is a great motivational book for those who think they aren't “language people”. That said, don't be misled by the title. Becoming fluent in three months requires almost total immersion and a generous definition of fluency. You're also likely to forget everything within the next three months if your efforts stop there. There are no shortcuts to language learning, just ways to avoid long detours. [Benny's travel and language blog](#) is also worth a visit.

“Fluent Forever: How to Learn Any Language Fast and Never Forget It” – Gabriel Wyner

A superbly practical book by this professional Opera Singer and polyglot. Particular emphasis on pronunciation and getting started with using SRSs for language learning.

[Gabriel's website](#) is also a treasure trove of language learning resources and tools

“Speak Like A Native: Professional Secrets for Mastering Foreign Languages”,

Michael Janich: This much less well known book by an ex U.S., security agent is a worth addition to any language learner's shelf. Full of practical tips and insights from the language programs at the CIA, NSA and State Department.

APPENDIX

I. MYTH 1: ENGLISH IS ENOUGH

[Contents](#) >

The fact is that many native English speakers feel they have neither time nor motive to take on a new language.

“English is the global language”, some reason, “I don't need anything else”. And from a purely utilitarian point of view they have a point. You can get by almost anywhere in the world with English. Google Translate can fill in most of the gaps.

But if we're going to get all utilitarian then let's at least be consistent. On a scale of one to ten how useful could learning a new language be to us in our lives and careers? How does this compare to binge watching Netflix or spending three hours a day on social media?

Hmmm.

"Listen, going to the gym and learning a language are hard and painful things. Those other things make me happy, it's a free world.", others might argue.

And that's fair enough, we all have limited time and energy. Nobody else has a right to say what makes us happy and how we should spend our time.

But let me at least try and convince you that learning a language is at least worth some consideration here.

A quick Google search will throw up many compelling and well referenced reasons – from health to wealth and wisdom.

For me: languages are a gate keeper to new friends, new authors, new places and new experiences. They transform the way I see, understand, travel and interact with the world. They improve my ability to focus and help my brain stay fit. These things all make me very happy and are more than worth the effort of an hour a day of patient labour.

At the end of the day, nobody can or should tell you how you to spend your time. But please do give languages another chance and you might be surprised where they take you.

II. MYTH 2: 'THE LANGUAGE PERSON'

[Contents >](#)

Like the Yeti, the fabled “Language Person” might, in fact, exist. But I know a lot of polyglots and yet I’ve never met one. Instead, learning a language takes a huge amount of hard work and time no matter who you are.

Despite this fact, the “Language Person” myth is a strong one. There are three main factors that contribute its persistence:

- **People lie (sometimes by omission).** Or they forget. Whether intentional or by mistake, it feels good to be mistaken for a genius. Everyone who is good at something was once bad at it.
- **People only need to be a little better at a language than you for it to feel like a lot.** This makes it very easy for someone who speaks a little of 12 languages to impress someone who speaks none of any of them.
- **It does get easier to learn languages the more you know.** This happens for a number of reasons but it doesn’t change the fact that it still took a lot of work or that anyone else can do it. A “Language Person” isn’t born, they are made.

Please trust me on this one, anyone can learn a language. If you need more proof then consider the fact that almost every single person on the planet has managed to learn at

least one.

If you're trying and finding it difficult then guess what: it should be! Learning isn't easy, that's one of the things that makes it so rewarding. But if you follow some of the steps in this guide it shouldn't be harder than necessary. Keep worrying away at it and progress is inevitable.

III. MYTH 3: I'M TOO OLD TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

[Contents](#) >

A common misconception is that once you're an adult it becomes impossible to learn a new language.

Children do have a few advantages when it comes to language learning. These include:

- **Empty brains.** It's easier to fit a skyscraper in an empty field than a bustling metropolis.
- **Lots of time.** If you could spend twelve hours a day playing and learning in a foreign language you'd fast become fluent in it too.
- **Patient teaching.** There are few teachers more patient and persistent than parents.
- **A profound need.** Survival in today's world depends on learning at least one language.

- **A sense of fun.** When was the last time you made up silly rhymes and songs to practice a new word you've learned? Learning is easy when it's fun.

That said, as adults we enjoy two advantages that we shouldn't underestimate:

- **Conceptual knowledge.** We already understand the world around us. When we learn the word "car" we don't also have to learn what a car is and does.
- **Self directed access.** To better teaching. To better learning tools. To travel. To foreign friends. To reading. To writing. To clearer motives.

As adults we have fuller brains and much less free time. The fact is though that we also have a lot less to learn and are able to put our limited time to much better use.

Looking past the limitations of age lets us see and make the most of its advantages. It's never too late to learn a language.

IV. WHAT IS FLUENCY?

[Contents](#) >

Fluency is like good driving – it starts when you no longer cause people around you to slow down or change direction.

The problem with all definitions of fluency (including mine) is that they're very context dependant. You might be fluent in the first five minutes of conversation or at a restaurant. This is unlikely to qualify you as fluent enough to study a degree in a foreign language. (N.B., the faster a program claims to teach a language the more limited this definition usually is.)

This is where frameworks like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) come in. Other frameworks do exist and it's possible to **convert between them**. In the interests of keeping things simple, you'll find the CEFR definitions below.

A good, conservative definition of "fluency" is one beginning at B2.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

A1 Basic User – Breakthrough or beginner

- Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type.
- Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has.

- Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

A2 Basic User – Way stage or elementary

- Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment).
- Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters.
- Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

B1 Independent User – Threshold or intermediate

- Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.
- Can deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken.
- Can produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest.
- Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

B2 Independent User – Vantage or upper intermediate

- Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation.
- Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party.
- Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

C1 Proficient User – Effective Operational Proficiency or advanced

- Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning.
- Can express ideas fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions.
- Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes.
- Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

C2 Proficient User – Mastery or Proficiency

- Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read.
- Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation.
- Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in the most complex situations.

V. HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

[Contents](#) >

It takes ~200 hours of good, guided study to go up one level on the [CEFR framework](#). That's an hour a day for just over two years to reach B2 (the starting point for fluency) for an easy language.

Here are some factors that will influence this estimate:

- **Language difficulty.** [More difficult languages](#) (like Japanese) can take up to four times longer for English speakers to learn than simpler ones (like Spanish).
- **Previous experience.** From [phoneme](#) and [vocabulary](#) overlaps to understanding [the language of grammar](#) – the more languages you know the easier they are to learn.
- **Quality of study.** Practice must be purposeful. Guided study that keeps pushing you will achieve more than staying in your comfort zone.

- **Intensity of study.** Forgetting is natural and inevitable. Taking 6 month gaps between study periods will increase the total number of hours you need.
- **Age** does make a difference neural plasticity but it's [less important than we often think](#).

Everyone has an opinion but the one thing that all reliable estimates have in common is this: it takes a very long time to learn a language. This shouldn't be a surprise. It also takes a very long time to learn to draw or even passably play a musical instrument or new sport.

It's important to understand what you're getting in to when you commit to learning a new language. It's also why motivation is such an important part of the learning process.

VI. LANGUAGES: BY FREQUENCY

[Contents](#) >

For a table breaking down the top languages in the world by native and non-native speakers [see this article on Wikipedia](#).

VII. LANGUAGES: BY DIFFICULTY

[Contents](#) >

This table lists many languages by their difficulty to learn for English speakers. It's from the [U.S. Foreign Services Institute \(FSI\)](#) and you can [check out the original list here](#).

The time required to learn a language roughly doubles between categories. In other words a category III language takes four times longer to learn than a category I language. **The CEFR definitions** and **~200h per level estimate** are a good starting point for category I.

* Languages with asterisks are more difficult to learn than those in the same category.

Category I

Languages closely related to English

- Afrikaans
- Danish
- Dutch
- French
- * German
- Italian
- Norwegian
- Portuguese
- Romanian
- Spanish

- Swedish

Category II

Languages with significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English

- Albanian
- Amharic
- Armenian
- Azerbaijani
- Bengali
- Bosnian
- Bulgarian
- Burmese
- Croatian
- Czech
- * Estonian
- * Finnish

- * Georgian
- Greek
- Hebrew
- Hindi
- * Hungarian
- Icelandic
- Khmer
- Lao
- Latvian
- Lithuanian
- Macedonian
- * Mongolian
- Nepali
- Pashto
- Persian (Dari, Farsi, Tajik)
- Polish

• Russian

- Russian
- Serbian
- Sinhalese
- Slovak
- Slovenian
- Tagalog
- * Thai
- Turkish
- Ukrainian
- Urdu
- Uzbek
- * Vietnamese
- Xhosa
- Zulu

Category III

Languages which are exceptionally difficult for native English speakers

- Arabic
- Cantonese
- Mandarin
- * Japanese
- Korean

Still curious? Read these next...

Nils and Jonas Salzgeber: On Combining Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science to Help You Become the Best Version of Yourself.

Time Quotes: 25 Quotes About Time and How to Make the Most of It

The Art of Magnetic Memory and the Power of Spaced Repetition Systems



Arthur is a thinker and writer who helps people who want more from their lives learn to be more productive, find more balance and live life more meaningfully. **Want to know more?** Take this 2-minute quiz to discover your Productivity Quotient (PQ) and learn how to get BIG things done. **Take the**

Quiz →

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Name *

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Website

POST COMMENT

Stefano Lodola says:

When I start learning a new language, I always use an audio course to listen and repeat because speaking is the most important activity.

4 APRIL 2019 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

Hi Stefano – audio courses can be great. They're good for pronunciation, vocabulary and listening (all important skills to prioritise early) – especially if you're shadowing – speaking at the same time as the recording and carefully correcting pronunciation differences.

That said an audio course is *not* the best way to improve speaking since it won't improve the most important speaking skill of all: dynamically generating new sentences.

For that, nothing beats starting language lessons one-on-one with a native speaker as early as possible!

Best, Arthur

4 APRIL 2019 AT

REPLY

Gary says:

Really Stefano?! When I started learning Maltese (my most recent language) I found that audio was the hardest! I always preferred to read a book in Maltese, or write a short story in it. I found that to be the easiest way!
I guess to great minds don't always think alike!

27 NOVEMBER 2019 AT

REPLY

Zheng Peng says:

Talking about funny translations for dish menus or road signs, China never fails to deliver. “Welcom Turist, We Spik Inglish”! Be ready to get lost between the “Racist Park” and the “South Grate”. Checkout a huge list of 140 photos (<https://www.actranslation.com/knowledge/fun/hilarious-translations.htm>) for this sort of hilarious translation fails that you could encounter in China and enjoy some good laughter! I had a few joyful days after finding this. 😊

Don't rely on machine translations when the matters discussed do matter – couldn't agree more! These photos are just perfect examples.

26 DECEMBER 2018 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

This is a superb resource, Zheng Peng. I cried with laughter several times going through it. Thanks for sharing!

13 JANUARY 2019 AT

REPLY

Dean says:

This is an insane guide! Where to start? I want to learn Mandarin, I'm 50+, and only speak English. Any hope? Any success stories? How would you start?

24 SEPTEMBER 2018 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

Hi Dean! My favourite app for learning Mandarin is Skritter. It will teach you reading, writing and tones. I'd start with lists of the top 100 radicals and then begin working your way through the HSK levels (these are the 6 increasingly difficult exam levels for learning Mandarin as a foreign language).

Next, get on iTalki (<https://theartofliving.com/go/italki/>) stat and book a few lessons with some of the official teachers. When you've tried 3 or 4 (make sure they're from Beijing or North East China if you want to avoid learning with a non-standard accent) pick one and go from there – they'll have a preferred text-book course that they'll lead you through (and you can almost always find the vocab lists for that course on Skritter also).

Any other questions, you know where I am. When you get a bit more advanced I've got a load of good resources I can share with you but won't overload you for now.

One last thing – settle in for the long-haul. I don't say that to discourage you. There are few languages out there more rewarding to learn than Chinese!

Mandarin isn't difficult per-say but it does demand enormous amounts of time to learn new vocabulary 😊

Hope that helps, all the best and go well!

10 OCTOBER 2018 AT

REPLY

Adrian says:

Hi, thank you for the great article. It is extremely useful. However, could you elaborate on this?

“Use back-chaining to tackle difficult words. When learning to pronounce a new word, start with the last syllable and work backwards. Try it – this tip is worth its weight in gold.”

How does this rule apply to people, whom English isn't a native language?

Thank you !!

16 SEPTEMBER 2018 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

Hi Adrian – great question and no problem!

Let's take a long German word like "Sehenswürdigkeiten" (which means "sights" – like a tourist would visit). Which can be difficult to say in one go.

To use back chaining:

First, break the word into syllables "Se-hens-wür-dig-kei-ten".

Then, start by saying just the last syllable: "ten"

Next, add the second to last syllable and say that: "keiten"

Finally, repeat the process until you get back to the first syllable.

The system works by slowly adding each new syllable in the first position where it's hardest to forget.

As you grow the word backwards, it's much easier to remember the last syllables because you've repeated them several times.

N.B., you can also apply this to whole phrases or sentences by starting with the last word and working backwards.

Does that make sense?

17 SEPTEMBER 2018 AT

REPLY

Tre says:

Love this advice!

8 AUGUST 2019 AT

REPLY

Joshua Galinato says:

This article has been so helpful with my language learning, it helped me achieve my goal of surprising my girlfriend by learning one of her languages. In the end, I managed to surprise her and I caught it all on film 😊 [<https://youtu.be/6OavHUebutk>]

27 AUGUST 2018 AT

REPLY

Tre says:

Oh Joshua, your girlfriend was terribly funny! At least her father was supportive of you and your efforts. Learn her mother tongue and her appreciation may be higher! Congrats on your achievement!

8 AUGUST 2019 AT

REPLY

Antoine says:

About learning in general, I'm sure you know there are only trends not set patterns or different rates. SRS may be only the first stage or learning, preferring patterns or understanding beyond words or labels, more in terms of systematic systems thinking. Or refer to "Never memorize something that you can look up.", Einstein. Not clear about

it though or how to integrate new thoughts/patterns without learning the underlying labels, and how this would apply to language learning which is always heavy on memory and light on understanding, although languages families and grammars or systems tend to overlap....

For languages, you may know this one, that I summarized below, and since you wrote an outstanding language learning summary you will relate:

10 things polyglots do differently from [this video](#).

Below are the methods outlined by [Lydia Machova](#)

1. [Benny Lewis](#) just speak with full immersion and make lots of mistakes
2. [Steve Kaufmann](#) a lot of input first (listens and reads massively before output)
3. [Lucas Rafael Bighetti Pereira](#) 500 most frequent words learning with example sentences (blocks) and communicate with these 500 words.
4. [Gabriel Wyner](#) flashcard system with no translations
5. [Luca Lampariello](#) doing only translation 😊 no flashcards, opposite from Gabriel:)
6. [Roby McPherson](#) dissection method take a recording on youtube with subtitles and dissect it into chunks of phrases into anki and memorize very well
7. [David James \(uncle Davey\)](#) the gold list: write list of words and rewrite them every two weeks, and realize that you retain about 30% of previous list.
8. [Lydia Machova](#) (as above)

LYDIA's "10 tips" (my own take)

1. the four pillars are fun, quantity, frequency and system. Choose the method that's fun for you only.
2. TV episodes are great, one a day. Watch same series in different languages
3. Only 1/2 hour every day, but EVERY DAY.
4. System and priorities and work on them ONLY, never developing all four skills at the same time.
5. Polyglots spend much more time speaking and listening than any other learners
6. SPEAKING is the most important skill. It's interactive, real communication. Basis for social skill.
7. Polyglots are not afraid to make a mistake
8. whether you think you can, or you think you can't, you're right (Henry Ford)
9. learn by yourself (ALL polyglots do that). Languages can only be learned, not taught. Like everything else.
10. Polyglots create their own material, one sentence/flash card/books at a time. Sometimes over the top.... Wishful thinking.
11. Learning only ONE language at a time?

On this last one, I'm still struggling with the one language at a time concept though, since I met people who apparently successfully do, but again what is fluency?

And to be clear, an excellent comment gives the actual 10 tips from Lydia, so you can skip the video if in a hurry:

1. Polyglots don't have a special talent! 15:07
2. Every polyglot has their own method 16:34
3. Polyglots learn languages mostly by themselves 17:08
4. Polyglots create their own language material 18:31
5. Polyglots learn one language at a time 19:12
6. Polyglots spend much more time listening and speaking 20:32
7. Polyglots are not afraid to make mistakes 23:12
8. Polyglots have mastered the art of simplification 24:50
9. Polyglots learn in small chunks 26:20
10. Polyglots enjoy learning languages 27:10

Thank you and good luck with your learning and exchanging with world citizens 😊 I see a lot of exchange and hope in the world 😊

14 MAY 2018 AT

REPLY

Ella says:

That! That's the most amazing and complete list of detailed information about language learning I've ever found ...and it's basically all for free.. I'm astonished! Thank you for this absolutely incredible guide. You put so much effort and time in it that I don't even have enough vocabulary (yah, English is not my first language) to say thank you!! So I'm basically gonna try and write something for you to read 😊

I'm on a language journey right now and learn only by speaking to natives and throwing myself right into the new language. That's my way to keep my focus up, just by giving myself no other choice than speaking my target language. But as I need to stop this journey on some point, I totally gonna save your site and this outstanding guide!! (I still can't express how amazed I am by this!!)

I love languages, not only because most of them sound way more beautiful than my mother tongue, but also for the culture behind it. Every time I switch the location I'm amazed by the cultural differences! I think learning a new language is like learning to become a new self. As you don't only speak another language but although think in a different way, so as I write this in English I totally have a much more different way of thinking than in my first language, if you know what I mean 😊

But in one point I disagree a little. I wouldn't totally dismiss language schools from the list of learning tools, yeah for sure they are expensive and most of them are totally useless but there are pearls beneath all this crap. You just have to find them.

My most recent experience is from a German language school in Berlin. Cute little groups (mostly between 5-8 people) and teachers which make this experience totally fun. I forgot most of the time that I was there to learn German, I just learned it in the process by just being there. I even found several places to stay with the help of my teachers and therefor was the hole day surrounded by natives and people who wanted the same thing as me, which was in fact an exceptional motivation for me! Especially as German is such a complicated language (at least for me, this was one of my greatest

challenges). I don't know if I'm allowed but I would like to post this pearl of a school here (if it's not okay please delete the link 😊) – <https://www.speakeasysprachzeug.de>

But once again: I totally agree that in most cases you should just avoid language schools, I've attended many and as I wrote there are just some pearls as the one I mentioned. All the others were just totally unsatisfying, expensive and absolutely useless! So still this guide is the most perfect way to learn a new language as it not only seems super effective but it is also the cheapest way of learning and I agree on another point: Learning shouldn't cost a dime 😊

So as I'm still glaring amazed on this post I'll leave you with this wall of text in bad English and go to sleep as I've got a date tomorrow with one of my new irisch friends ;D (ya I'm learning English right now :D)

have the most amazing day
– Ella

29 MARCH 2018 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

Thank you for your awesome comment Ella. Your English is superb, and reading it made my day!

Thanks also for sharing the link to SpeakEasy – I may even look them up next time I'm in Berlin (though it can be hard to actually speak any German there)!

As you say, it's a shame that language schools are so often at best expensive wastes of time and at worst harmful to a student's progress. That said, a truly exceptional language school can make language learning a social, engaging and (most importantly) fun experience!

Another time when language schools can be helpful is when they unlock access to local homestay experiences that might otherwise be hard to organise. I had a great experience with the LTL Mandarin school in Beijing for just that reason.

Anyhow, thanks again, good luck with your language learning journey – and who knows, one day you may even come back to your own language and find its beauty 😊

Go well! Arthur

31 MARCH 2018 AT

REPLY

Hugh says:

Hey dude, GREAT post – this will help a lot of language learners and people starting out! I have read the 3 books recommended, and have slowly been putting together nearly an identical resource on my supermemo collection over the last few months. You got there first 😊

Cheers

27 OCTOBER 2017 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

Haha. Thank you, Hugh.

Will you please come back and share your resource list (or a link to it) when you're done? I'd love to see it.

There are so many options when it comes to learning languages. No matter how well you think you know the landscape you always end up discovering something new.

Good luck and go well.

28 OCTOBER 2017 AT

REPLY

Hugh says:

Of course! There's still a little material to process – I had uploaded some extra articles and things on different aspects of language learning, and did my best to explain the high-level, metalearning principles in a well-structured, clear way, and then explain the main steps, possible methods, tools etc. for language learning within this framework. It's very similar to what you've done above! As you'd expect, I suppose, as we've both taken in some of the same resources, and have probably had not-too-wildly-dissimilar language learning experiences, I think.

My focus on metalearning principles was in part inspired by the quote: "As to methods there may be a million and then some, but principles are few. The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods. The man who tries

methods, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble.” Whoever may have said this is discussed here: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/07/17/methods/>

So absolutely, I'll post the link here asap!

Mmm, I love learning, and language learning certainly is a fun ride.

Cheers, have fun too mate 😊

30 OCTOBER 2017 AT

REPLY

Daniel Guar de Freitas says:

Such an insightful read, thank you. I've been managing my schedule to fit in my language learning hobby. Would you mind sharing your language learning daily schedule by any chance? I'm fine tuning mine and will be ready to get back in the study habit soon.

23 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

Thank you Daniel – I'm so pleased it's helped you! That's a great question and one I'll try and answer properly in a longer post / the next version of this guide. My language schedule changes depending on what stage I'm at learning a language. In the last few years it's also fluctuated between 0 and 6 hours per day depending on what else is going on!

I would say the best practice that I've developed is taking time to sit down every few months and draft out what I call an "OLP", an "Optimized Learning Plan". During that session I'll look back on what I did and didn't do over the last few months. I'll reflect on the progress I've made and ask myself questions like: What went well? What would I do differently?

After that I'll take the time to think about how to use my time in the coming months. I'll then refer back to this plan every so often to check how things are going. Thinking about language in its 7 components is a super helpful framework for this!

I hope that helps. I do have all my notes from the languages I've tackled so at some point I'll try and write a much fuller reply on this topic.

Good luck with your studying!

24 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Daniel Guar de Freitas says:

Hey Arthur, thank you so much for taking your time to answer my question. I like the idea of sitting down and reflecting on the study progress. In that way, I can see how one can find weak spots and improve where needed.

Based on the linguist Paul Nation's "Four Strand" theory, I made a quick schedule just to get the study started.

I am looking forward to reading your post on this subject. Keep up the good work, Arthur!

24 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Pierre says:

Dear Author or Group of Authors,

Wow. You just opened a treasure chest. I have been a French as a 2nd language teacher for many years and I have learned immensely. And though I do not agree with you on everything – the value of group classes, for instance – the tips and knowledge you share with the readers are most valuable and will, among other things, back my statements when I explain to students what learning a foreign language really is, what it requires and what to expect in terms of personal involvement. Thanks.

21 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

Hi Pierre, thank you so much for your kind feedback! I'll admit I'm a bit militant on the group class front 😊 Being in contact with other learners can be a great motivator and source of learning ideas, even if it's not the best place to be exposed to a language! Good luck with your teaching!

24 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Maggie says:

Extremely great post! Thank you for share, and for take time for do this! I am trying and keep so hard to be a learner, and all these is very useful! Hope some day I will get the perfection in languages! Thanks again!

20 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

You're welcome Maggie! I'll be writing more about Charlie Munger soon but here is one of my favourite quotes from him in the meantime:

"I constantly see people rise in life who are not the smartest, sometimes not even the most diligent, but they are learning machines. They go to bed every night a little wiser than they were when they got up and boy does that help, particularly when you have a long run ahead of you."

24 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Hans says:

Very beneficial article. Thank you for writing it!

18 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

You're very welcome Hans, thank you for stopping by!

18 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Erin says:

Great post- such a huge resource list I wish i had when I was trying to learn Spanish.

16 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

Arthur says:

Haha. Thanks E. #first #obligatorygfcomment

24 JULY 2017 AT

REPLY

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