

15 HABITS

OF SUCCESSFUL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

How to form a language-learning routine that you'll actually stick with.



“ We are what we
repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not
an act, but a habit.
”

- Aristotle



Deciding to learn a language is a lot like deciding to learn *math*. You don't just learn math as a whole, nor do you learn a language as a whole. You must consider vocabulary, grammar, syntax, pronunciation, and a new writing system, not to mention cultural competencies. So, how do you learn *all of that*?

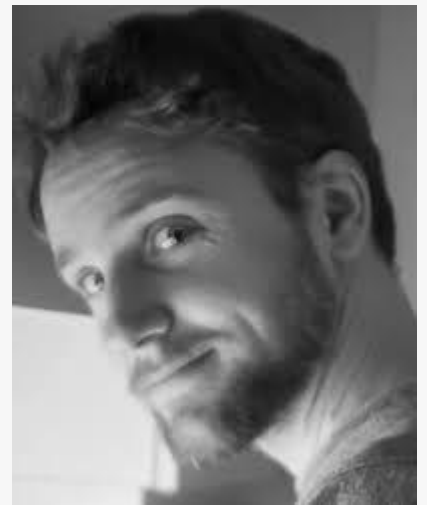
At Transparent Language, we appreciate enthusiasm for language learning more than anyone, but the truth is, many language learners start out too quickly, investing more time, money, and energy than they can afford. Then, when that initial motivation tapers off in the later stages of language learning, the tides reverse and disappointment and confusion sets in.

Successful language learners have another strategy at their disposal: develop good habits. Learners who form effective, sustainable habits in the early stages of language learning are more likely to stay in that routine and achieve their language goals.

In this eBook, five passionate language learners of all experience levels share their secrets and reveal the habits that took them from monolinguals to world-traveling, silver-tongued multilinguals.

OUR AUTHORS

Meet five language learners of different backgrounds and experience levels whose habits you can adopt into your language learning routine!



SAM GENDREAU



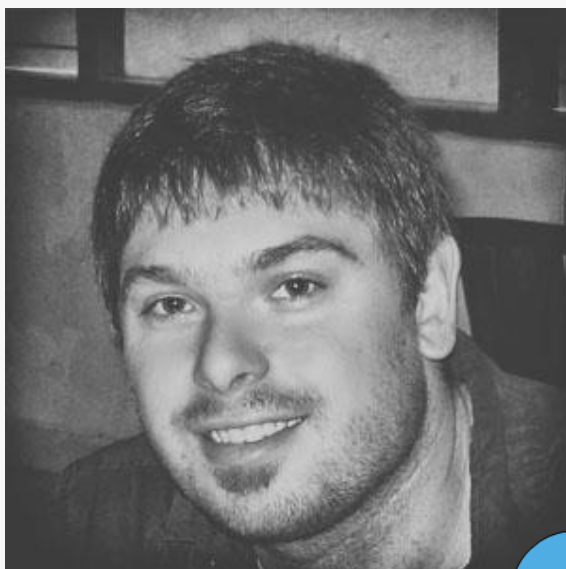
Sam Gendreau writes the [Lingholic blog](#). He has been learning languages and participating as an active member of the online language-learning community for quite some time now. He has written dozens of articles on language learning, motivation, and learning hacks that you can find on his blog.

MALACHI REMPEN



Malachi Rempen is an American filmmaker, author, photographer, and cartoonist. Born in Switzerland, raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico, he fled Los Angeles after film school and expatted it in France, Morocco, Italy, and now Berlin, Germany, where he lives with his Italian fiancée. [Itchy Feet](#) is his weekly cartoon chronicle of travel, language learning, and life as an expat.

RYAN O'ROURKE



Ryan O'Rourke is a Canadian teacher, writer, linguaphile, and founder of [Treksplorer](#), an independent travel and language-learning website dedicated to helping busy people balance their careers and family lives with their travel and learning goals. When he's not wandering the globe, entertaining locals by speaking their language with a Canadian accent, Ryan calls Northern Ontario home. He lives there with his family of fledgling world travelers.

LIZZIE DAVEY



Lizzie Davey is a writer with a passion for travel, art, and language learning. A couple of years ago, she went to Madrid to study Spanish, where she realized that language learning has to become a part of everyday life if you want to succeed. Now, she makes an effort to ensure the learning process is kept fun and interesting. You can read more about her travel and language-learning escapades on her blog, [Wanderful World](#).

MEAGHAN MCGONAGLE



Meaghan McGonagle is the Social Media Coordinator for Transparent Language. Prior to spending her days writing the **Language News blog** and tweeting various foreign language goodies to the masses, Meaghan skipped from one French-speaking country to another to put 10 years of classroom experience to the test.



HABITS

1. Form Goals
2. Assign a Place for Studying
3. Make Use of Dead Time
4. Take a 30-Day Challenge
5. Take the Edge Off
6. Don't Think, Just Say
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8. Celebrate Small Wins
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13. Be Purposeful
14. Learn One Word Each Day
15. Record Your Progress



1. FORM GOALS

A common practice in business development is to set **SMART** goals, or goals that are:

- Smart
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Relevant
- Time-bound

Getting in the habit of setting SMART goals is critical for language learners. Learning a language will take a lifetime, so setting specific landmarks along the way will give you direction and motivation.

“To be fluent” is vague and hardly measurable. More specific, attainable goals would be:

- To study vocabulary every morning at 10 a.m. for 30 minutes, until I can have an everyday conversation with a native speaker.
- To read one target language newspaper article every evening, and look up unfamiliar words until I can comprehend the entire story.
- To spend 30 minutes on every lunch break studying a survival phrasebook until I can survive for one week in a country that speaks the target language.

Get in the habit of setting a series of short-term goals so you always have a specific task to work on. Achieving a series of small goals will lead you to the ultimate goal of fluency.



2. ASSIGN A PLACE FOR STUDYING

It may help you to associate a certain room or place with your language. Assign an area or room in your house as the “language only” area, and go there only to study. Surround yourself with learning materials and sources of motivation for your language studies.

You don't have to limit yourself to your house, of course! Pick any place that you find conducive to studying that does not offer major distractions.

- Search for a cozy coffee shop and bring your backpack full of resources.
- Find a park bench or shady tree and sprawl out with a good book in the target language every weekend.
- Flop down on a chair in a study nook in the local library and take advantage of the language resources [libraries](#) offer!

Become a regular wherever you go. Chat with the barista or the librarian. Make it a comfortable space that you look forward to visiting each week to study.



3. MAKE USE OF DEAD TIME

There may be days when you don't have 30 minutes to sit down and study. Get in the habit of using dead time to study, even in brief intervals. Dead time is any period where you can multi-task well enough to absorb the language: commuting, waiting in line at the store, cooking, etc.

Work studying into your dead time on a daily basis:

- Listen to radio stations or podcasts in the target language during your **commute**.
- Turn on some of your favorite music in the target language and dance around as you cook, clean, and do **chores**.
- Turn on a TV channel or watch a YouTube video in the language, during the commercials of your favorite **TV** show.
- Flip through vocabulary flash cards on your mobile device while standing in that eternal line at the **grocery store**.

This habit will keep you engaged with the language even on days when you don't have the time for in-depth study. Before you know it, this practice will be ingrained into your mind and become a regular part of your language-learning routine.



. TAKE A 30-DAY CHALLENGE

Commit to building a small, positive habit when learning a language and do it every day for 30 days. After the month is up, stick with it and/or move on to another habit. Why is this a good idea? Watch Matt Cutts' [short and funny TED Talk](#) about his 30-day challenges for an explanation and some motivation.

Make your goal as fun or as challenging as you wish, but commit to something you'll actually stick with. Some ideas for language-related 30-day challenges:

- Read the news in the target language, rather than your native language.
- Listen to target language music at the gym. (This one will even get you going to the gym more often!)
- Listen to target language podcasts during your commute every day.
- Write a letter to a friend, family member, pen pal, or even to yourself in the target language.
- Spend 20 minutes a day using your [online language-learning program](#), then refresh each morning.

Remember, you can stick with anything for 30 days!



5. TAKE THE EDGE OFF

This might not be a good *life* habit, but it works great for practicing your conversational speaking skills. The biggest obstacle in most peoples' way of learning a language is working up the courage to sound like an idiot. Nobody likes to revert back to a toddler's vocabulary and grammatical prowess, but *you have no choice*. It doesn't matter how much you study at home, you'll never speak like a native unless you get in the habit of speaking and screwing up, a lot, in public.

A little advice for *adult* language learners: have a beer or two first. You won't screw up less, but you won't worry so much about it. (Drink responsibly, of course; go too far and you'll sound like a toddler in any language!)

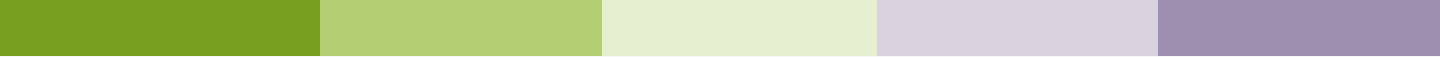
Don't drink? Underage? Alcohol clearly isn't an option for you, but you can still find a ritual that takes the edge off. Wear your favorite lucky underwear, or extra-strength deodorant—whatever you need to do to give yourself the confidence to bounce back after completely mucking up a perfectly good sentence.

Get in the habit of performing whatever your confidence-building ritual may be, and eventually you'll find you don't even need it anymore!



6. DON'T THINK, JUST SAY

Here's another habit that you probably shouldn't bring over into your normal life, even though it is effective for language learning. Stop constructing perfectly-crafted sentences when you're having a conversation. For some of us, the more we plan out the perfect phrasing, the more likely we are to bungle it big time when put in the spotlight. Teach your brain to wipe the slate clean with each new response.

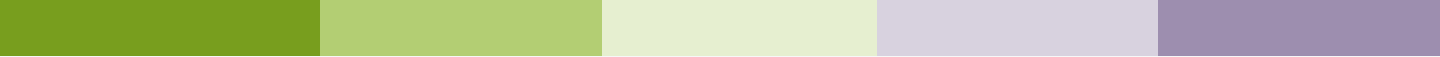


Yes, you might not speak as well as if you had stuck to the script, but the script goes out the window anyway when you step up, so why not go with your gut? You'll develop the much more important skill of building sentences as you go along, which is what you do in your mother tongue (and it's why your mother told you to think before you speak—you can do that when you're good enough that you don't have to think about not thinking about it).



7. TURN ON THE TV

Boy, this list is just full of vices (don't get excited; junk food and gambling won't help your language skills!). Though it apparently won't help your grammar, watching TV or movies in your target language will help build your vocabulary, comprehension, and if you repeat what you hear, your pronunciation.



Watch a variety of programs. If you're just starting to learn a language, a children's show might be your best bet. Eventually, you'll work your way up to sitcoms for some humor and slang, dramas for idioms and excitement, and the news for more formal speech and cultural insight. Even commercials have something to offer, so don't flip the channel when they come on.

Get in the habit of watching just one program a day. If you don't have the time to actively watch it, turn it on anyway while you fold laundry or eat dinner. Hearing the foreign language, even as background noise, will get you comfortable listening to the language.

Start with subtitles (not in English!) or just jump in cold turkey. One day, you'll look up and realize you don't remember if they were speaking English or Russian.



8. CELEBRATE SMALL WINS

It's easy to get discouraged while learning a language. A minor communication breakdown can be enough to send some of us more sensitive language learners into a panic. Instead of focusing on your mistakes, celebrate every single achievement, no matter how small. This positive habit will keep you optimistic towards languages.

Things to celebrate:

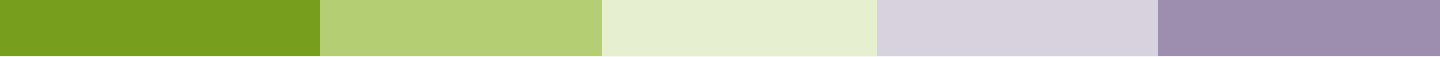
- Having your first conversation entirely in the language.
- Using a new word correctly in a sentence.
- Understanding a new word based on context, without having to look it up in a dictionary.
- Seeing the humor in a joke without having to ask for an explanation.
- Writing your first letter to a friend in the language.

Chalk these things up as giant wins. Patting yourself on the back after every step and revisiting all of your successes periodically will remind you of how far you've come. This habit will keep you motivated for the long journey ahead.



9. INTRODUCE AUTHENTICITY

Looking for a single magical method that will turn you into a language-learning wizard? It doesn't exist. Rather than expending all of your energy on one course, book, or CD, mix it up with *authentic* materials in your target language.



Uncovering authentic foreign language materials can be as easy (and as cheap) as digging through YouTube, iTunes, Spotify, or Netflix. With a little patience, you will find a wealth of engaging material catering to nearly any interest!

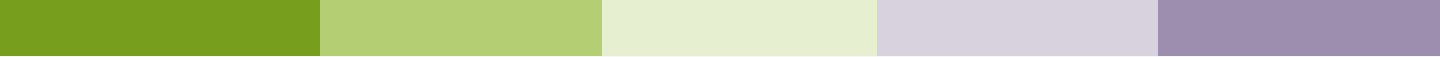
If current affairs are up your alley, consider taking your language skills to the next level by listening to the BBC World Service, currently broadcasting in over 30 languages worldwide. Fans of fiction may find dual-language parallel-text books helpful—search through Amazon and check with your local library to see what you can uncover.

Authentic materials don't just help you develop important language skills. You'll also get further insight into exciting parts of the culture, which will improve your overall comprehension.



10. CATER TO YOUR LEARNING STYLE

Language learning is not a “one size fits all” endeavor. Everyone learns in different ways, and to unlock your full potential, first test your learning style and find language-learning materials that best mesh with that style. Don’t waste your time focusing on courses that don’t appeal to your strengths. Choose engaging materials that work with your optimal learning style.



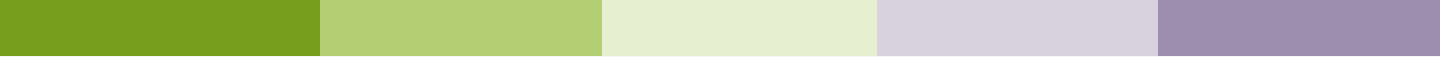
There are many different learning styles, and many options available, no matter what style works best for you. For example:

- Visual learners prefer to learn using images and spatial understanding, so movies and image-heavy textbooks are optimal resources for these learners.
- Aural learners respond best to sound, so using music and audio-based courses as language-learning tools would benefit these learners.
- Verbal learners prefer using words, and will enjoy software with voice recognition capabilities and speaking activities.
- Social learners prefer to work in groups, so forming a discussion group or finding a partner on Skype would be most beneficial.



11. REVIEW BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Before you make a start on something new, take a look over the last thing you did. Not only will it jog your memory on specifics you may have forgotten, but it also further cements the material in your brain. Make it more fun by giving yourself a small task or quiz to complete before you can begin a new step.



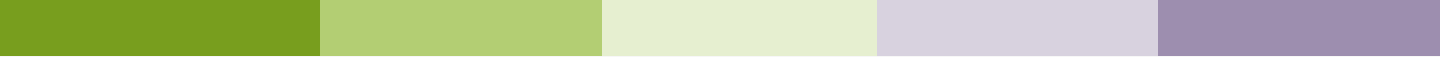
While you're studying, you're stuffing your short-term memory full of new words, grammar rules, idioms, and more. To learn a language so that you can retain and recall it, you need to transfer that information from your short-term memory to long-term memory.

Review and repetition ensures this transfer. Take 5 minutes every day to go over what you learned the day before. At the end of each week, set aside one day specifically for review. Repeating this at a monthly and even yearly interval will refresh what you may have forgotten while also revealing how much you have really learned!



12. SPEAK OUT LOUD

It can be hard studying a language alone, away from fellow learners. It is very important, though, to practice speaking as well as reading, writing, and listening. This skill often takes a backseat, particularly if you are learning a language outside of its native country. Break that bad habit and replace it with a good speaking-related habit!



It may seem awkward, but there are plenty of opportunities to speak a language on your own:

- Read a book or the news out loud to yourself.
- Sing along with a target language song.
- Speak along with a language tape.
- Make use of language software with speaking activities and voice analysis technology.
- Say your daily to-do list out loud.
- Do affirmations in front of the mirror.
- Narrate what you're doing while you cook, clean, etc.

Remind yourself that, even though you probably look a little crazy, you're doing your language skills a favor. Get in the habit of reading or reciting things out loud as often as possible—you'll hear the difference over time.



13. BE PURPOSEFUL

What is the point of doing something if you don't know why you're doing it? Be strategic in choosing language-learning activities. At the end of each activity, evaluate what you learned, how successful the activity was, and what you might adjust for next time. Of course you can still choose to do things you just find *fun*, but to get the most out of your time, be purposeful and think about what you want to accomplish.



Even if you're just listening to a podcast or reading an article online, try to pinpoint what you want to get out of it. Do you want to expand your vocabulary on a certain topic? Do you want to familiarize yourself with a specific grammatical structure? Think about how the task at hand will help you achieve those things. At the end of doing it, spare a moment to think about whether the task actually helped you reach those goals, and how successful it was.



14. LEARN ONE WORD EACH DAY

Many seasoned language learners will tell you to engage with the language *every day*, even if it's just for 10-15 minutes. One of the easiest ways to keep yourself in that routine is to learn one new word a day. I don't just mean glance at the word and its meaning. You need to really commit to learning that word and using it as often as possible throughout the day.

Transparent Language offers a [Word of the Day](#) service in more than 25 languages. The daily e-mail allows you to read the new word, listen to the audio, and see it in context with the sample sentence. But you can certainly kick it up a notch:

- Use the word in your own sample sentence and Tweet it or post it in your status on Facebook every day, to hold yourself accountable.
- Search for famous quotes that use the word, and record them in a quote book.
- Look up other slang uses for the word and idioms that contain the word so you can use it in other contexts.
- Make up a short rhyme using the word and repeat it to yourself throughout the day.

Have fun with the word and work it into your day in any way you find helpful. Repeat this process every day to keep your mind involved with the language. It's a simple habit, but it will add up over time!



15. RECORD YOUR PROGRESS

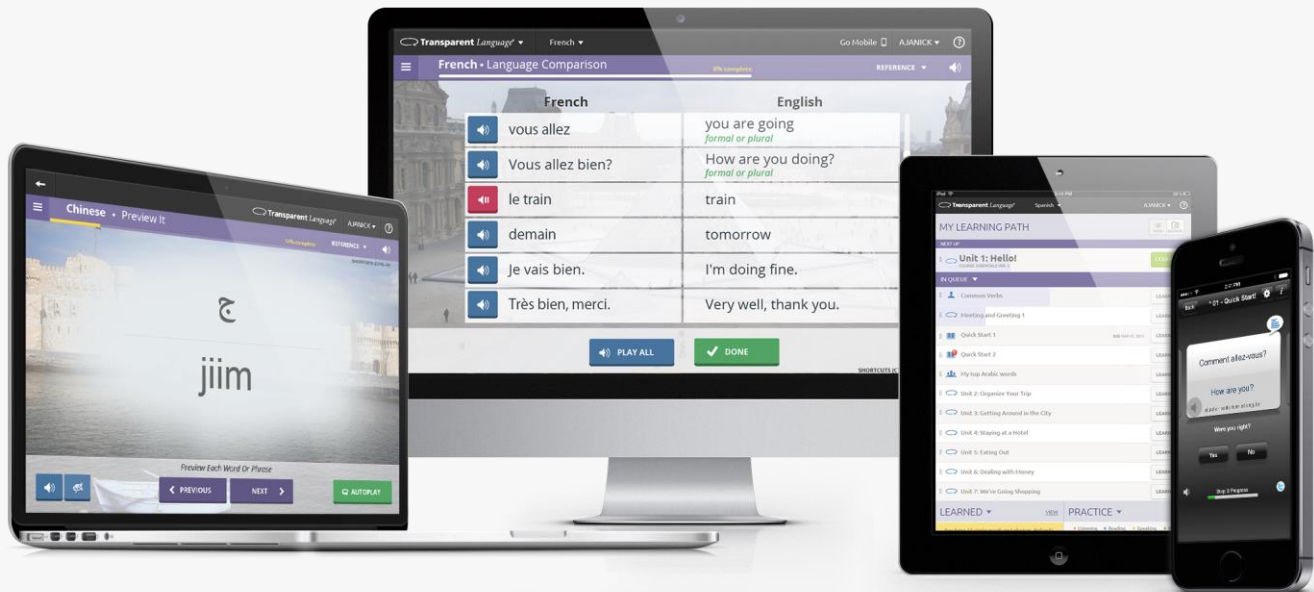
When someone tells you they've lost 50 pounds, you're probably going to be impressed. But you know what's *really* going to blow you away? When they show you before and after pictures and you can see the difference for yourself. The same idea applies to language learning—sometimes you don't realize how far you've come unless you can really *see* it. Keep a record of your progress so you can look back over time and see your improvements. The easiest way to see your progress over time is to write it down. Buy a notebook and get in the habit of writing in it once a week.

You can write about whatever you'd like:

- Keep a journal just like you would do in your native language.
- Read a news article and summarize what happened and your reaction to it.
- Get your creative juices flowing and write a series of short stories.
- Write letters to family, friends, or classmates (Make a copy for yourself before sending it!)
- Copy over your favorite recipes into the target language.

Whatever you choose to do with it, keep all of your writing organized in one place and *date it*. Any time you're feeling discouraged, flip back through it and notice how far you've come: look at the new vocabulary, grammatical structure, and idioms you've started using. It's a healthy way to engage in the language on a regular basis, and it's a great motivator when you need a push!

Ready to get in the habit of learning a language?



Transparent Language Online offers language-learning materials in over 80 languages. Learn a vocabulary list every day, review your grammar skills with our grammar videos, and practice speaking out loud with our voice-analysis software. Save your progress and pick right back up where you left off, helping you get in the habit of learning a little bit more every day! Sign up for a free trial and take the first step towards your successful language-learning routine.

Try it free!