



HOW TO TEACH YOURSELF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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How to Teach Yourself a Foreign Language

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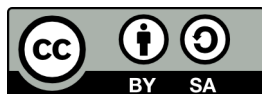
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How to Teach Yourself a Foreign Language

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Introduction

Welcome to *How to Teach Yourself a Foreign Language*. This book is designed to get you learning any foreign language as effectively as possible. It will help you understand what resources you need, where to find them, and what you should do to start learning. In addition, it will teach you the fundamental principles of learning languages to help you learn better. This guide has plenty here for any learner—from absolute beginner to upper-intermediate.

If you think something is missing or have any queries, you can [send me an email](#). You can also find me at my [website](#).

How to use this guide

Please note: this guide is shorter than it may initially appear. This is because I have placed the essential information in the first part. To get a powerful jump-start to your learning, you only need to read up to **Chapter 8: The End of Part One**. If you are just starting, this is how I recommend you use the guide.

If you are impatient to start immediately, you can skip to **Chapter 2: Your Language Method**.

The final third of the book contains appendices with optional additional information. These appendices will be referenced throughout.

Finally, I advise you to think of this guide as an investment. If you start with a bit of theory, you will save time in the long run by doing it better the first time. Relative to the enormous amount of time you will be spending with your language, time spent in preparation is both minuscule and disproportionately effective.

Principles

Principles are the basic underlying rules and ideas that enable you to be an effective language learner. They are how you should approach language learning and are the biggest difference between ordinary beginners and experienced language learners. Many of the points here you will sometimes hear called “language hacks” elsewhere online. This is somewhat of a misnomer.¹

This guide collects principles from around the web to save you the trial-and-error most learners usually have to go through.

I’ve scattered most of the principles throughout the guide to prevent you from getting overloaded. While a principle may be placed under a certain section where it is most relevant, it will also apply to other aspects of your learning.

¹Elaboration can be found in the section **Why is the term “language hacks” a misnomer?**

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Chapter 1

Before you start

1.1 How long will it take?

The first thing to note is this: there is no perfect level. There are only milestones that you set according to your goals. Have a level in mind you want to reach; how long it takes then depends mainly on two key factors:

1. Approximately how many hours are required to reach your desired level
2. How much time you can spend during the day

Beginners often underestimate the amount of time it takes to learn a language. How much time you can spend during the day is the primary indicator of how achievable your goal is.

A good idea of how many hours it takes to reach a reasonably competent level comes from the [FSI Language Difficulty Ranking](#). For an easier language like Spanish or French, most people take around 1-2 years to reach a good level. If you studied 10 hours solidly per day, every day, you could potentially reach the same level in just over two months. If you think you can't reach your desired goals given the time available, you need to either make time or adjust your goal's timing.

1.2 Set a goal

This guide assumes you have already chosen a language. If you haven't, read [Appendix I: Choosing a Language](#).

To learn a language, you should first set yourself a goal or set of goals. Spend some time properly considering what motivates you to learn your language and the situations you want to use it in. Write your goals down somewhere.

The best goals are [SMART goals](#). That is, they are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

Specific—Goals need to be something you can hold yourself accountable to. Don't make your goal too vague (e.g. "fluency").

Measurable—Language progress can be hard to measure, but there should be some degree of visible progress towards your goal.

Achievable—Don't aim too high. You can't be fluent in a year without working at it like a full-time job.

Relevant—Make your goal depend on what you want out of your language. Use [Appendix I: Choosing a Language](#) to help you clarify your thinking.

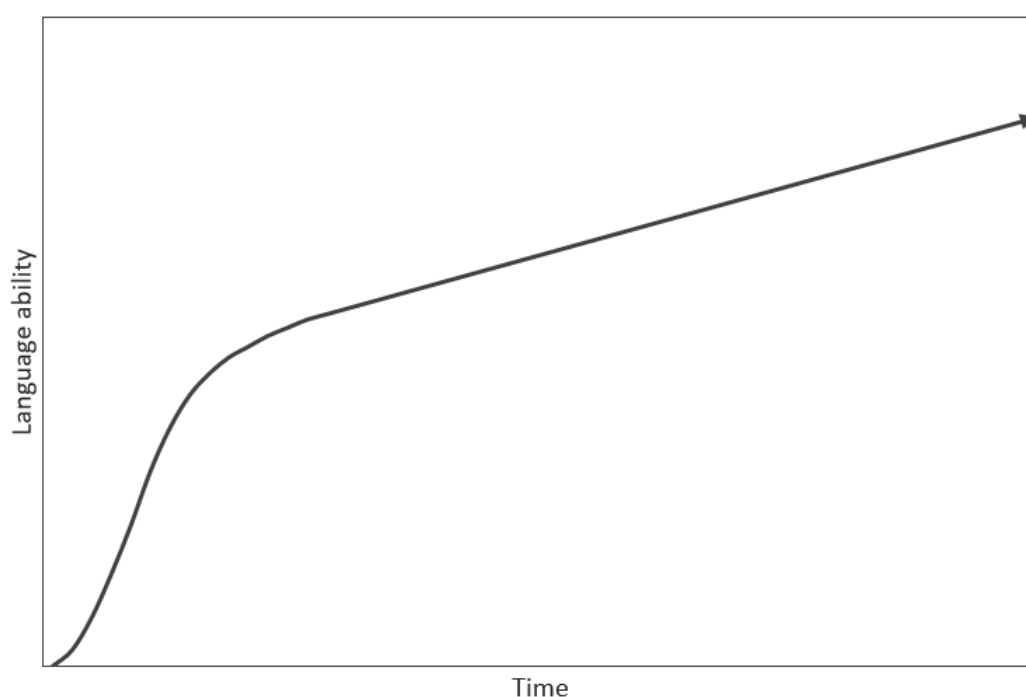
Time-bound—Picking a point in time discourages you from slacking off and letting progress lapse.

If you like, you can have smaller, short-term goals. These can help you measure your progress and track other important milestones such as vocabulary.

Don't be afraid to revise any of your goals. If you're going at it for the first time, it can be hard to know how long it will take or if the goal you choose is really what will motivate you in the future.

1.3 How you progress

One of the best-kept secrets in language learning is how surprisingly doable it is to reach an intermediate level. The fastest progress will be made just beyond the very beginning stage. Every new bit of grammar and vocabulary will be very common in your language, and this will result in a noticeable improvement. After you hit the intermediate level, however, noticeable progress appears to slow down. This results in your progress feeling something like the graph below:



The good news is you can be conversational in a surprisingly quick amount of time. Once you have the basics of phonology and grammar down and know around 2,000 words, you will probably be able to make it through a conversation with an accommodating native speaker. From there, a bit more practice conversing to build more comfort with the language and you can call yourself conversational. This is one of the most rewarding parts of language learning.

Conversely, progress beyond the early intermediate stages will feel slower by comparison. Every new word or form you learn will be much more rare. Becoming fluent means becoming

familiar with an ocean of unknown words, nuance, idioms, and rare grammar. Reaching high levels of aural comprehension and pronunciation will take a similarly long time. While you might not need all these forms, idioms, and words to get by, they are part of what comprises native-level ability.

Not every learner chooses to progress to an advanced level. In fact, most stop somewhere around the intermediate level, with their exact level usually determined by their goals. There is nothing wrong with this. Learning a language requires trade-offs, and for many people the extra time reaching an advanced level isn't worth the effort.

1.4 You are better at language learning than you think

Before we move on to what you will learn, I thought it would be useful to quickly dispel some myths surrounding language learning. If you are already feeling confident and motivated, you can skip this section.

First, **you don't need to be highly intelligent or have a special talent to learn a language.** Everybody learns at least one without too much trouble. The technique for learning your second language is not wildly different to your first. The key is that a lot is learned when you give yourself time.

Second, **language learning is not as hard as it seems.** While many people recall struggling to learn a language in school, this is in fact the fault of poor technique used by school curricula.¹ By using content to let the language come to you, the process of learning will seem far less effortful.

Finally, remember that **it's natural to forget things a lot.** For many people this is a frustrating experience that can cause them to think they're not good enough. This is not true. Learning is not instant and every language learner forgets a lot. There is simply too much to learn to expect you will remember all of it. The best way to move past this is to accept you will forget and seek ways to prompt yourself to remember without blaming or criticising yourself.

1.5 Your mileage may vary

There is a lot of room for individual preference when it comes to what works in language learning. Recognising this, I have tried to keep this guide as open as possible by at least making you aware of the full range of possibilities available to you. At the same time, the purpose of a guide is to give you best practice without too much uncertainty. This means at I have to give recommendations based on what works for most people. If I recommend something, that is because I think it's a good idea for at least 95% of learners.

Everyone is different, and you may find something I recommend doesn't quite work for you. Remember, you are in control of your learning. Experiment. If you find something effective, you should continue to do it without worrying over if other people recommend it or not. You'll notice me repeat this point throughout the guide.

That said, if you're new, it's not always easy to tell what is working well. Until you're a more experienced language learner, I advise you don't stray too far from the beaten path.

¹For more information, see [What's wrong with how schools teach languages?](#)

Chapter 2

Your Language Method

In this chapter we'll talk about what you need to learn, what you will use, and how to put them together to make a method. In the next chapter I will help you find resources and choose the types you want to use. It is best to read the next two chapters together before you start searching for resources.

2.1 What you will learn

Languages consist of two core components:

1. **Grammar**
2. **Vocabulary**

The language is expressed through any of the four skills:

1. **Reading**—This is the main source of input for most language learners
2. **Writing**—This skill generally comes with reading, but effective writing often requires learning spelling or stroke order
3. **Listening**—This involves learning the language's sound system, including vowels, consonants, and tones
4. **Speaking**—Mostly pronunciation, including sounds, tone, and intonation

The skills of reading and listening together are called **input** (or content). The skills of writing and speaking are called **output**.

Once you complete the beginner stages you will know:

- Basic grammar—Basic verb and noun forms, the general structure and logic of the language
- A functional vocabulary—approximately 1,000-2,000 words, enough to be understood in basic conversations
- The basics of the four key skills—enough to function in whatever context you are learning for

To get there, you need the three core resources.

2.2 The three core resources

There are many different types of resources; however, there are three core classes we will look at to help you start learning:

1. A beginner course
2. A flashcard program
3. Input

A beginner course is any kind of course that tries to teach you the fundamentals, such as the core grammar and basic vocabulary in a structured manner

A flashcard program helps you learn vocabulary and grammar by repeatedly showing you words or sentences and asking you to recollect their meaning

Input is any piece of content produced in the language such as books, news, or movies

There is room for individual preference—there are learners who shun using flashcards or courses. I don't recommend you start out by doing this.

The three core classes of resource form the basis of your method. You will see how to find them shortly. Before you do, it's best to first know what you are going to do with them.

2.3 Language learning method

A language method is a combination of resources and exercises one uses to build a routine. Methods can be simple or complex, but regardless of how much effort you put into it, you will need one.

Here are the key components of a method:

- A good quality course
- A way to drill and reinforce your core knowledge, focusing on aspects not well covered by your course
 - Vocabulary—often with flashcards or reading
 - Grammar—often with exercises, flashcards, or reading
 - The four skills—focus on those related to your goal (often listening or pronunciation)
- Practise the language based on your goals
 - Input—Lots of spoken and written content
 - Output—Read and write to reinforce your knowledge

Don't stress about building the perfect method. You don't have to do everything at the start or have a perfect routine. A very common method is to simply progress through the course

you think looks best while ensuring you spend most of your time with lots of the best beginner content you can find. Supplement your learning with vocabulary flashcard practice. Almost every experienced language learner does some variation of this with a new language.

It is good to take bits of other people's methods you find while searching for resources. Because I don't know what language you are learning, I can't tell you what the best courses for your language are. You also might find good advice on your specific language that I can't give you here. Use any guides you find to help you build your own method, but you don't have to copy other people's methods wholesale.

Now that you have an idea of how your method will work, we can move on to how you can find the three core classes of resource.

Chapter 3

Resources

This chapter will show you how to find resources and help you think about which ones will work for you.

3.1 How to find resources

Every time you encounter a good guide or a resource you think you might like, bookmark it, then keep looking. Only go back to look at the best ones once you've spent some time searching.

There are three good ways to find resources:

1. Google search communities dedicated to your target language—often there will be an official list of recommended resources or a popular post by a user
2. Google search for guides or articles about learning your target language—probably the easiest method
3. Language repositories

Language repositories

Language repositories link or store a large number of language resources in one place, including tools, content, and courses. Well-curated repositories can be a great place to find useful resources for your language. However, non-curated repositories that simply list a large number of resources without ranking them can be overwhelming and often include low-quality resources. The top two listed below are well-curated and recommended.

Table 3.1: *Some popular language resource repositories*

Repository	Description
All Language Resources	A fantastic curated list of resources for lots of languages. Highly recommended.
Zero to Hero	Curated list of video content and useful resources in lots of languages.
r/languagelearning resources wiki	Useful repository with links to subreddits containing resources for many languages
Cstrobbe Github	Github repository of every kind of resource
Learn Any Language	A community wiki with lists of resources
So you want to learn a language	A website with lots of resources
Multilingual books	Another website with lots of resources
Open Culture	A website that lists free resources

3.2 Choosing resources

The next sections will look at the wide variety of resources available, sorted into the three core classes. I will also provide you with some examples of these resources that serve multiple languages. Because there are many great resources only deal with one language, this guide does not represent the full range of high-quality resources available. Your own research should hopefully unearth more. If you don't find anything, you'll still have this chapter.

There are three key factors you should consider when assessing whether a resource is worth trying:

1. If it is recommended by other learners
2. How much you think you will enjoy using it
3. How well it fits the archetype of a good resource outlined in this chapter

3.3 Beginner course

There are 6 basic types of beginner courses you can use. It will be up to you to choose which you prefer.

1. **Online text, audio, or video explanations**—websites, podcasts, or video series that explain the basics of your language
2. **Teach-yourself books**—books that provide explanations, exercises, and beginner input (highly popular)
3. **Online courses**—often websites and/or apps with their own methodology (also very popular)

4. **Listen-and-repeat courses**—courses that function by having you listen to phrases and then repeatedly prompting you to recall and say them out loud
5. **Classes**—teachers in a classroom
6. **Tutors**—one-on-one teaching

Table 3.2: *Some good examples of beginner courses*

Course	Examples
Text, audio, or video explanations	YouTube videos Free online lectures/courses such as listed here Assimil (paid, audio) BBC Languages (free) Live Lingua Project (free resources) FSI, DLI, and Peace Corps language courses
Teach-yourself books	Colloquial series
Online courses	Duolingo (free) LingVist (paid) Busuu (free with paid premium) Glossika (paid) Babbel (paid) Mango Languages (paid)
Listen-and-repeat courses	Language Transfer (free) Coffee Break Languages (free) Pimsleur (paid)

You may also find [Cooljugator](#) useful if your language has large amounts of verb conjugations.

What makes a good beginner course?

The course you choose should be one that you like and is recommended by other learners. Remember: There is plenty of room for personal preference. Choose something that you think works for you. You can change courses over the course of your learning.

Look for courses that teach you the language in context—that means using lots of input. In addition, a good course will not only cover grammar and key vocabulary but assist you with the basics of the four skills.

Table 3.3: Advantages and disadvantages of each of the six types of beginner course

Course	Advantages	Disadvantages
Text, audio, or video explanations	Plenty of variety, usually free, and easy to use	Quality is variable and remembering what is taught is usually left to the learner
Teach-yourself books	Courses are usually complete and good quality	Sometimes rely on ineffective grammar exercises; not very interactive
Online courses	Often the highest quality, interactive, and can provide the full set of resources a learner needs	Often pricey and may require an ongoing subscription
Listen-and-repeat courses	Very good at helping you start to speak, get a feel for the language, and remember and use lots of useful words and constructions	Not well-rounded
Classes	Help students stay motivated; teachers can provide correction and language feedback.	Costly; can be a slow way of learning the language if lessons are not frequent
Tutors	Very powerful method; can provide correction and language feedback	Multiple lessons are very costly; often only used as a supplement for this reason

Listen-and-repeat courses

Listen-and-repeat courses are perfect for people who are travelling soon and need tourist phrases as well as anyone that doesn't have a lot of time to study at their desk. They're also great at building confidence speaking early-on.

If your focus is on communicating, listen-and-repeat courses are recommended. Because they are so specialised, I advise using them as a supplement. If you are less interested in communicating, consider them optional.

Tutors

Tutors are one of the best supplementary resources as they can structure learning to your preference. Tutors are highly recommended for those who can afford them.

Since tutors can be expensive, using one simply to explain the basics to you is not the best use of your money. Any information they give you will also be freely available on YouTube or another website. Using tutors as a source of input, to identify errors, and provide correction is generally a much more productive use of your money. Remember: learning is a fundamentally internal process—you still need to put in hard work regardless of the source of the information.

You can find tutors in real life, through your local community, library, or university. Relatively inexpensive tutors are also available online on websites such as [iTalki](#).

Budget

Budget can be an important consideration for many people. There is no direct correlation between price and quality—many poor resources cost money, while many of the best resources on the internet are free. However, there is a general trend towards paid resources being better. Paying for something that is recommended by others and works for you can be a good investment.

If you prefer a cheaper option, a good path could be using text, audio, or video explanation or free online course in combination with a listen-and-repeat course. If you're willing to spend a bit of money to make your life easier, you will likely find value in using a paid online course in combination with a personal tutor to help you practise and identify errors.

3.4 Flashcard program

Flashcards are the perfect tool for learning new words and helping you remember grammatical constructions. While you can make them yourself, these days we have apps to make the process simpler and more convenient.

Table 3.4: Some good flashcard software

Flashcard software	Description and links
Anki	iPhone app (paid) Android app (free) Shared decks Manual Some clear video explanations here and here
Memrise	An online flashcard program that focuses on using mnemonics
Clozemaster	A flashcard program that teaches using fill-the-blank sentences that features a rather gamified interface
Quizlet	An online flashcard system
LearnWithOliver	Another online flashcard system

What makes a good flashcard system?

The best flashcard programs use spaced repetition. This works by automatically spacing out your revision using something called the [forgetting curve](#). You are first shown a word multiple times and asked to recall its translation. Once it deems you to have learned the word, the algorithm will then increase the interval between revisions. The algorithm attempts to get you to recall a word just before you forget it. Eventually, after a lot of revisions, you will have been prompted by a word enough times it will be safe in your long-term memory.

Anki

The most popular flashcard software is [Anki](#). Anki is popular due to its free desktop and android app, large community, functionality, customisability, and clean interface. The flipside is that there can be a fairly steep learning curve, depending on what you want to do with it.

Anki allows its users to export and share flashcard decks they make. There are many pre-made shared decks for you to use to get started. If you're a complete beginner, find a deck with words

ordered by frequency. The best decks also have example sentences. Feel free to download multiple and try them out.

You will find yourself confused by Anki at some point, so it is recommended to read the manual soon after you download it. You can find it in the table above.

3.5 Input

Sometimes content will already be integrated in the course you are doing. Even if your lessons already include texts or audio, it will be useful to find your own that interest you. More content is always good.

Here are some examples of input you might use:

Table 3.5: *Examples of input*

Mode	Example
Reading	Books Articles Reddit-like websites News websites Conversation transcripts
Watching	Interviews YouTube channels Movies TV series
Listening	Music Podcasts Dialogues for learners

What makes good input?

The best input for a beginner is both **comprehensible** and **interesting** to **you**. This content is often intended specifically for adult beginners. As always, try to find recommendations from other learners. Here are the best resources you can find as a learner:

- YouTube channels with conversation or dialogue intended for adult learners
- Podcasts intended for learners
- Short stories for learners, in books or online
- Books for young teens
- Websites with articles or news intended for learners
- Graded readers
- Anything with audio and a text transcript

- Anything with naturalistic dialogues

A common method is to use content intended for children; however, the vocabulary is often not very useful nor the topics very interesting to an adult.

Content such as TV series, music, movies, and real news websites is generally made to be understood by adult native speakers. This content is usually too difficult for beginners to use effectively. I do not recommend you use them at the start.

Finding content as a beginner can be difficult, particularly for languages that are not as popular. If you're starved for interesting content or just want to, feel free to try something outside of the typical beginner range—you can still learn with it.

Table 3.6: Popular sources of input

Source	Description
Easy Languages YouTube channel	Street interviews with dual-language subtitles—quality beginner content in lots of languages
Netflix	Great source of foreign language TV and movies with subtitles
WordLab YouTube catalogue	Massive catalogue of learner-appropriate channels in lots of common languages
Olingo	Shows you some good YouTube content for some of the most popular languages
eja.tv	Live TV
r/languagelearning media section	A list of good media resources
Project Gutenberg, Wikibooks, Loyal Books	Free public domain e-books
Gloss	Website with a lot of beginner content
The Fable Cottage	Dual-language fairy tales

You can also use the [Language repositories](#) section further back to find good input.

Popular tools

There is a variety of useful tools to help you improve your learning with input. I recommend you check all of these out.

Table 3.7: Popular tools

Tool	Description
Readlang	Import texts and get instant translations by clicking on words, has a built-in flashcard program
Lingq	A popular paid service similar to Readlang that provides lots of content and records and highlights known words
WordLab	A fantastic chrome extension that gives you more control over Netflix and YouTube playback and subtitles— highly recommended for intermediate learners
Keyword lookup	Chrome tip to help you search dictionaries faster using the search bar
ImTranslator	Dictionary lookup addon

3.6 Other resources

Dictionaries

The best dictionary to use depends on your language. Not all are listed here. The ideal dictionary will give you example sentences, an English equivalent, and the correct pronunciation.

Here are a few dictionaries that offer translations for multiple languages:

Table 3.8: Popular online dictionaries

Dictionary	Description
Linguee	Clean interface. translations are sorted by frequency
Wiktionary	A popular dictionary with helpful pronunciation guides and support for a wide variety of languages
Bab.la	Great interface and lots of sample sentences. Has a built-in verb conjugator
Reverso	Useful example sentences
Tatoeba	Helps you find example sentences
Forvo	Example sentences and pronunciation recordings—no definitions
WordReference	Standard dictionary

Translators

Translation software can help you understand entire sentences. Avoid becoming over-reliant on translating whole sentences. Try to understand a sentence yourself first.

Table 3.9: Popular translation software

Software	Description
Google Translate	The most popular translation software on the web
DeepL	A powerful alternative to Google Translate

Phrasebooks

Phrasebooks are optional, but phrases can help you get a feel for the language and greatly improve your communicative ability when travelling. A cautionary note: phrases cannot be learned simply by reading them. Learning needs to be supplemented with flashcards.

Here are some websites you might like to use:

Table 3.10: Online phrasebooks

Website	Description
Book2	Phrasebooks in lots of languages
LanguageGuide	Interactive way of showing simple vocabulary

Key tip: Use a variety of different resources

Try to use a variety of different resources and try new things occasionally. This includes different courses as well as a variety of content. It's surprisingly difficult to translate your language ability from one skill into another without a lot of practice. For example, reading lots will help you learn a lot of words, but you will struggle to recognise these words when you hear them until you've done a lot of listening practice.

Key tip: Use resources you enjoy

Studying languages is not always the most exciting activity, so choosing a course and method that you enjoy is a good idea.

There seems to be a lot of individual difference when it comes to learning method effectiveness. Some methods people tout as effective might not work for you at all. If you find the method you are using is too boring, change it up. Don't worry too much about what others recommend.

Chapter 4

Building a study schedule

Use the resources you have found to build a method, following, as best you can, the outline in the section [Language learning method](#).

Principle: Work towards your goals

One of the best things you can do for your progress is to focus on your goals and the skills you need to get there. Unfortunately, the individual skills improved by studying do not easily translate into your target situation. Usually, the best way to do that is through “direct practice”, spending time directly practising the thing you want to become good at.^a For example, if you want to communicate, you need to spend a large amount of time practising communicating.

^aThis concept is covered well by Scott Young in his book, [Ultralearning](#)

4.1 Time

The key factor determining how fast you learn is time with the language. There is no magic bullet; a wide variety of techniques work.¹

It is important to study every day. Ideally, you will **commit to study at least an hour** and never below 20 minutes. There is no maximum—the more you can commit each day, the faster you will progress.

Try to devote a larger block of time to study without any pauses or distractions. It helps if a block deals with a single resource, such as an article, course lesson, workbook chapter, or podcast episode.

How to split your time

There is no universal rule for how you should split your time. A good split is around **one third of your study time on grammar, one third on vocabulary, and a third on the four skills**.

In addition to your study time, you should also **spend plenty of time engaging with different kinds of content** without using it to study anything specific. How much of your time should be spent with study and how much you should spend just using content is up to you. It will depend on how much time you have spare once you’ve done your dedicated study, how

¹If you’re wondering how some people become conversational in a large number of languages, check out the discussion in [Why do some people seem to know lots of languages?](#)

much your dedicated study already has used lots of input, and what content is available that is interesting and at your level. Aim for around 25-75% of your time to be spent this way.

4.2 Building learning into your lifestyle

Think of learning language as something that becomes a part of your life rather than something to set time for like a school subject. This enables you to spend far more time with the language than you otherwise would have. Here are some ways you can do this:

- Spread your learning out throughout the day rather than segmenting a single large block of time
- Switch the language of the media you consume
- Try to find a friend or group of friends that speak your target language
- Change the language of the devices you use

A big advantage of the modern world is you can easily take your study materials and content with you wherever you go. If you're a person who generally has little time to sit at a desk and study (or even if you're not), it can be very helpful to use the small bits of downtime throughout your day, on the bus, in a queue, walking between class, etc. Here are a few ideas:

- Get a penpal on a chat app such as HelloTalk; use any downtime to read and send messages
- Use digital flashcards on your phone
- Use a beginner course that has an app
- Listen to podcasts while cooking, cleaning, walking, driving, or during any activity where you don't have to carefully focus
- Carry a book with you

4.3 Motivation

Principle: Keep up your motivation

Maintaining motivation is key to succeeding at your language learning goals. Staying motivated is important because it will cause you to study more frequently, help you study longer, and reduce the chances you will give up. Becoming unmotivated can lead to stagnation as you find it difficult to sit and study for the required length of time. Pay attention to your motivation and focus on doing activities you know keep you motivated and interested.

Here are some ideas to help you keep your motivation high:

- **Use resources you enjoy**—Try different methods and choose one that you enjoy the most. This will take the edge off the study process. Read more in the key tip [here](#).

- **Use content you find interesting**—Don't use boring dialogues if you can't stay focused and stick with them. There's lots of interesting content out there. You will find yourself enjoying learning your language a lot more when you find content you enjoy for its own sake. Read more in the key tip [here](#).
- **Work towards your goals**—Striving towards your goals, making progress, and successfully engaging with those parts of the language can be a motivating experience. It can be helpful to keep your goals around you. For example, if you are learning to communicate with certain people, try to be around those people more often. Read more in the section [Approach your study right](#).
- **Refresh**—Try changing your routine by studying at a different time, studying in a different place, doing exercises you wouldn't usually do, or using content you don't usually use.

4.4 Chapter summary

Study at least 20 minutes a day, ideally more. Devote a block of time for focused study, but also spread your learning out and find ways to incorporate your language into your daily life.

Split your study time into thirds between grammar, vocabulary, and the four skills. In addition, spend lots of time with content to help your brain absorb the language.

Keep up your motivation by choosing resources that you enjoy using. Keep your goals in mind.

Now that you've hopefully got a good idea of what to do, there's lots more advice out there for anyone who wants to learn effectively. The next chapter will look at how you learn. We will finish with how to best use each of the three core resources.

Chapter 5

How to learn your language

5.1 Comprehensible input

If you take nothing else from this book, let it be this: **you acquire your language when you use it**. This idea comes from a book by linguist [Stephen Krashen](#). Krashen's insight gives rise to the single most important principle in language learning. You will see it repeated throughout this guide:

Principle: Use the language in order to learn it

The best way for you to learn a language is by engaging with it meaningfully. To do that you need a large amount of input that is both **comprehensible** and **interesting to you**. That can mean reading texts, listening to podcasts, watching videos, writing stories, finding native speakers to practise with, or anything else that takes your fancy. As with your native language, you will eventually come to learn grammar and vocabulary by encountering it and being prompted to remember or otherwise extract meaning from the language.

Learning does not happen after completing textbook exercises, memorising a word or rule, or repeating after a teacher. Language is a skill you must practice and refine. In many ways, it is more like learning to ride a bike or play an instrument than learning facts or rules. Without seeing how it all goes together you will not learn to use the language, nor will anything you learn through exercises stick. Later, speaking and writing in a low-pressure environment will further solidify your knowledge and let you practice the skills essential to use your language.

You can find Krashen's book, *Principle and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, free online [here](#), watch a great video demonstration [here](#), or read a summary of the book [here](#).

Principle: Repetition helps you learn

You learn words and grammatical forms by repeatedly encountering them in context, meaning these things will be apprehended only once they come up naturally enough times. Once you know something easily you can focus on other aspects that are more unfamiliar, and hence gradually improve your understanding of the language.

Repetition happens naturally as the most common words and forms are encountered frequently. Drills such as flashcards are designed to repeatedly prompt you with the same thing until you remember. You can also get repetition by reading the same piece of content multiple times. It is also useful to review activities, lessons, or content you covered a few days or weeks ago.

5.2 The four mediums of learning

There are four basic ways to engage with the language that enable you to learn some aspect of it. It is not essential to know this; however, it may help you think about what exercises you need to do. The mediums are:

- **Direct explanation**—It is helpful to have aspects of language explained to you. Beginner courses usually do this.
- **Drilling**—Drilling is the act of isolating some specific weakness in your learning and doing an activity that only focuses on that. This includes flashcards and language exercises.
- **Encountering in your content**—By encountering forms and words in context, you eventually come to understand how they are used (comprehensible input).
- **Language output**—Speaking and writing your language will reinforce your knowledge and help you get feedback.

For any piece of grammar or vocabulary, aim to move down the four mediums as you improve your skill. In many cases, learners skip direct explanation and drilling. Avoid skipping encountering in your content. While it is possible to jump straight to language output, this can result in fossilised errors. It is generally best to see something in use before you use it yourself.

In the next three sections we will cover how to approach grammar, vocabulary, and the four skills.

5.3 Grammar

While it might seem like there is a lot of grammar to get your head around, the core grammar of a language forms a kind of “hump” that, once you get past it, opens the language up and enables progression with relative ease. Once you’re done with the core grammar, you will probably never have to approach it as systematically again.

Key tip: Do not rely on memorising grammar rules

In general, memorising rules is a poor way to acquire a language. Learning only happens when you use the language. Rules and other aides such as conjugation tables should be used as a stepping stone to help you understand meaning in context.

Your initial grammar learning comes from your beginner course. This can be supplemented by exercises such as sentence flashcards and exercises, however this should not be the majority of your time. Of the four mediums, the most effective will be encountering in your content. Listen and read to build and refine your knowledge. If your beginner course forces you to complete a lot of exercises before you can move on, consider using a different course.

There are some learners who go mostly without studying grammar.¹ This is done by compensating with lots of input, making sure to notice grammatical forms as you encounter them. I don't recommend you go without studying grammar.

Key tip: Avoid spending all your time on grammar

While the noticeable progress feels good, you will learn faster overall with the help of input and context supplementing your learning. Languages are much more than grammar rules and you will not learn by studying grammar in isolation.

5.4 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is generally the more underrated of the two core components. A huge portion of speaking a language is really just knowing enough words.

For a language like English, the number of words you'd need to be fluent is over 10,000. Increasing your vocabulary is therefore always a useful task when you don't know what to study. While 10,000 is a large number, you will get there eventually by chipping away at it every day.

Start off by learning the 1,000 most common words as fast as possible. Stretch for 2,000 if you can. That lets you understand a lot of basic language.

Beginners typically learn vocabulary in three main ways:

- Words introduced through your beginner course
- Flashcard drills
- Reading and listening

It is rare that you will learn a word simply by having it introduced to you once. Vocabulary is learned after repeated exposure, either in content or with flashcards.

¹Further discussion of the debate on the efficacy of grammar instruction can be found [in the appendix](#).

Key tip: Prioritise words over grammar

Prioritise increasing your vocabulary over learning advanced grammar. Children passively understand far more words than adults by the time they begin using more complex grammar, and this is for a good reason.

When using content or speaking with someone in your target language, take note of how often you struggle to understand the sense of what is being said because of grammar versus vocabulary. Not knowing the correct word is a far more common barrier than grammar. In conversation, advanced grammar can often easily be understood through context. This is rarely true of unknown words, unless they happen to include roots or affixes that are already familiar.

What words should I learn?

There are two primary criteria you should use. These are **personal relevance** and **frequency**.

Learning words that are personally relevant to you is a good way to ensure you are practising what you are learning. To meet this criterion, the words you learn need to be **appearing in your resources often** or be related to words you think you will need to meet your goals.

Choosing words based on the frequency they appear in the language is useful as they are the most likely to be useful to you in the future. Words in natural language follow something called [Zipf's Law](#). This means that the most common word will occur twice as often as the next most common word, which will occur twice as often as the next most common, and so on. This means languages are heavily dominated by the most common words. **Once you have learned 2,000-3,000 words, you have covered almost all the words you will hear in daily conversation.** With only a few hundred words, you will have access to almost all the filler words, which make up most of spoken language.

Key tip: Don't learn related words together

Although it might seem like a good idea, it's best **not** to learn words together if they are in any way related. This is because the similarities can cause you to confuse them. This includes near synonyms (rely/depend), opposites (fast/slow), and words typically recounted together (days of the week, numbers).

Word Lists

It can be helpful to keep a list of those words you have looked up and find interesting enough to want to remember. This can serve as a useful reference and the act of writing a list by hand can aid memorisation.

Word lists should not simply be read over but revised with one side covered to get your memory working.

You can find more info on learning vocabulary in [Appendix C: Further Advice on Learning Vocabulary](#).

5.5 The four skills

Reading and writing

For those of you learning a language with the Latin alphabet, your job is much easier. At most, all you need to concern yourself with are the different sounds that many of these familiar letters will be linked to.

Those learning a language with a different writing system will need to start from scratch. A good language course will start by teaching you the new system. It is best to prioritise this. Learning a new writing system is not as hard as it seems. At first the new symbols or characters can be confusing, but with practice they will gradually become easier until it is just like reading English.

The best way to learn a new script is by using it. Start trying to understand the basics and move quickly into applying your knowledge by reading simple sentences and words.

For those learning a language with characters such as Chinese *hanzi* or Japanese *kanji*, learning to read and write can be a long, slow process. It is generally recommended to start early. The best way to learn them is already well-covered elsewhere. I recommend you search online to find a good guide.

Listening and speaking

Listening well is mostly comprised of the ability to hear sounds and distinguish words quickly, while speaking is a combination of good knowledge of words and forms and accurate pronunciation. These aspects will be covered next. The insights that help you to become good at pronunciation also help you listen better and vice versa, meaning the skills are closely linked. Becoming good at these requires practice, and that will take time.

Practising listening

It is helpful to practise listening throughout your learning using beginner podcasts or other audio resources. Here are some ways you can improve your listening:

- Listen to resources that have a written transcription; read and listen first, then try to listen without the transcript
- Find listening resources that are deliberately slowed down
- Use listening resources that are easier than something you would typically read; this allows you to focus solely on listening without being distracted by unknown words or grammar
- Spend time learning how letters correspond to sounds (orthography)

Pronunciation

Good pronunciation typically does not come naturally to adult learners, so it can be important to pay focused attention. Poor pronunciation learned during the early stages can become ingrained and hard to fix, so learning as you start speaking is preferable. Pronunciation is essential for those who are learning tonal languages. This section is a quick-start guide. If you would like to learn more on pronunciation, please read [Appendix A: How to Learn Pronunciation](#).

I recommend you use Google or search a community to find a pronunciation guide for your target language. A common method of many courses, guides, and dictionaries is to give an English approximation for each sound. Generally, this is insufficient to achieve accurate pronunciation. The best guides will explain each sound using diagrams, explanations, or special symbols (called the [IPA](#)) in addition to audio to show you how they sound.

Take note of elements of your target language that are different from your native language, then spend focused effort improving them. Dedicate some time to doing some activities in which you practise speaking some words alone. Use a dictionary such as [Forvo](#) or [Wiktionary](#) or any audio input to get a good example to try mimic. It is helpful to practise throughout your study by trying to read texts, flashcards, or anything you encounter aloud.

Remembering words and forms when speaking

When first speaking, many find themselves struggling to remember the words they need. Often learners attribute this to some fundamental difference between understanding and using the language. In fact, the typical reason is that learners don't know words as well as they initially think, meaning they don't easily come to mind when they are needed. Using active memory to speak spontaneously requires better knowledge of vocabulary and grammar than understanding it. Trying to speak reveals this shortcoming. Luckily, if you can already understand a word when you hear or read it, progressing to active use is only a small bit of practice away.

5.6 Chapter summary

Focus on using comprehensible input to acquire your language. Start by reading and listening as much as you can, then consider speaking and writing later on.

All your grammar and vocabulary will be acquired through one of the four mediums (direct explanation, drilling, encountering in your content, and language output). Your beginner course will do a lot of the work to introduce you to a lot; however, you will generally need to do a lot of flashcard study and reading and listening to build your knowledge.

Start by learning the 1,000 most common words as quickly as you can. Don't over-focus on grammar, but don't ignore it either.

Focus on learning your language's script if it is different and focus on pronunciation. Early effort will pay off in the long-term.

Chapter 6

How to Use Your Resources

In this chapter we will look at how to best utilise the classes of resources I recommended earlier. There is also a section on using dictionaries.

6.1 Beginner course

Using your beginner course effectively

Exactly how you use your beginner course depends on what you have chosen, so there's not much specific advice I can give you. Here are three suggestions:

- Use the advice on learning grammar from the previous chapter.
- Make a workbook. Many people make their own workbook and write down everything they learn. This is a time-consuming process you may find slower than simply using content, however the choice is yours.
- Don't try to memorise your lesson content. Languages must be acquired, not memorised.

Principle: Don't try to learn things perfectly first time

Learning happens slowly over time, usually well after you are first introduced to a word or concept. You don't need a perfect understanding of one unit before you learn the next. The very act of moving forward with a loose understanding will help teach you things already covered as you encounter them again.

When to stop using a beginner course

You can move on once your course finishes or you have dealt with the core grammar, such as core verb conjugations and noun declensions, articles, and prepositions. This occurs faster with languages more similar to your native language. With Dutch, for example, that period of time is quite small, but you can expect to be dealing with grammar for much, much longer with Arabic or Russian.

After that point, it helps to use your course or some other book or website as a reference of forms to take note of when you are using content.

I recommend you try to finish your course if possible. The advantage of continuing to study grammar in a structured manner is that you will have a wider knowledge base that will let you recognise forms you might miss otherwise.

6.2 Flashcards

Using flashcards effectively

Use example phrases with your words. Phrases provide useful context and language that can help you recall words and teach you about how the language is used. Words in your target language will not be used in the same way as they are in English, so learning simple word-for-word translations will not help you speak. Phrases can also provide a useful prompt to aid recollection. More advice on using sentences is given in [Further advice on flashcards](#).

There are three ways you can review your cards:

1. Prompt with target language, try to recall native language (receptive learning)
2. Prompt with native language, try to recall target language (productive learning)
3. A combination of both

I recommend a combination of both. If you only choose one method, **use your flashcards productively**. Productive learning (that is, trying to *produce* your target language) is more challenging, which will aid your learning.

Flashcards are great for highlighting grammar as well as words. A grammar flashcard will typically use a phrase that utilises the grammar you want to learn, in addition to something that calls it out and explains it if necessary. Flashcards used for grammar should almost always be used productively.

Make your own flashcards

The best way to use flashcards is by creating your own. If you find vocabulary that you want to know and use sentences that you have chosen, learning them becomes easier as you are more motivated and pay closer attention to what you are learning. This can be time consuming, but many find the time spent building the flashcard deck useful, too. If you use Anki, use the documentation. There is also a helpful video [here](#). There is a learning curve, but once you understand it you can customise your learning and create cards quickly and easily.

Key tip: Keep your flashcards simple

Learning something new takes focused effort, so you can only really memorise one thing at a time. Learning a sentence chock full of new grammatical constructions and words might seem efficient, but will actually slow you down. The purpose of sentences is to provide helpful context. Having overly difficult sentences defeats this purpose.

At most your flashcards should have one new word and one example sentence. The example sentence should contain at most one unfamiliar grammatical form and, ideally, no other unknown words. If you have lots of information you want to learn, split it into multiple cards.

At the very beginning, even simple constructions may be completely novel to you, but learning short, useful phrases early is a great way to absorb the language. Your first sentences will need to be as basic as possible, such as “how are you?”.

6.3 Input

As already noted in the principle **Use the language in order to learn it**, use input that is both comprehensible and interesting to you.

Using input effectively

There are two general ways to use input, passively and actively.

Passive learning with input is simple. Simply use your content and try to understand as much as possible. The key is to use as much as possible to help you get comfortable with the language. You can repeat the same content multiple times if you want. The more you repeat it, the more you will get useful repetition that solidifies your knowledge. This kind of learning requires using content you already understand around 98% of.

Active learning with input is essentially a study activity. In this case, you would choose something to actively improve (such as listening ability or vocabulary) with a piece of input you already understand at least 90% of.

There is no common rule for how much of each you should do. Active learning is generally considered the more effective use of your time, though passive learning is generally much easier and more enjoyable.

Key tip: Use content you already use in your native language

A great source of language practice is simply doing the things you already enjoy doing in your native language but using your target language instead. This can be watching YouTube, TV shows, reading comic books, or even gaming.

As a beginner, finding good content can be hard, especially for those learning rare languages. You may have to compromise and choose something less interesting because it is nearer your level.

Principle: Your level +1

Learning occurs when the brain struggles a bit before making a successful connection. The best way to ensure this is to choose content that is your level +1. +1 means that the content is **just a little bit challenging**. It is difficult—but still comprehensible.

When something is too difficult, a lack of context and meaningful connections create a barrier that results in a lot of tiring mental effort with relatively little payoff. When something is too easy, there is no mental challenge, and you don't learn anything. When a resource is already mostly comprehensible, all the known words and forms surrounding something new provides useful context that reduces the barrier to understanding. Read more in the section **Difficulty + successful recall**.

What precisely +1 means depends on what you are studying. An audio recording with 100% known vocabulary might still count as +1 if you struggle with aural comprehension. For more info, read **Your level +1 in your content** in the appendix.

You can find more info on using input **in the appendix**.

6.4 How to use dictionaries

Dictionaries are key learning aid that are best used to get the meaning of **key unknown words** that you want to know.

More important than what you do is what you shouldn't do. Here are four key **don'ts**:

1. **Don't simply look up new words as you encounter them.** First, attempt to understand the sentence, then finish the section or text. You are unlikely to remember the meaning of a word if you immediately continue reading.
2. **Don't look up uncommon words when there are plenty of common ones to learn.** A large portion of the new words you encounter will only appear once, meaning there will not be repeated opportunities to help learn them.
3. **Don't blindly trust single-word translations.** Translations are imperfect. Languages use words differently. For example, the English word "exercise" has two completely different meanings, one to do with fitness and the other with study. An online translator won't always know which one you mean. There are often entire phrases that, if translated directly, would sound very strange and unnatural.
4. **Don't use dictionaries to learn words on their own.** This can cause you to learn less common words without being aware of their proper usage.

6.5 Chapter summary

Use your beginner course effectively by taking the advice on learning grammar from the previous chapter. Avoid memorising your lesson content. Once you have covered the core grammar, you have the option of ceasing to use your beginner course regularly.

Flashcards are best used by prompting with both your target language and your native language. This ensures you encounter words and forms in a variety of ways. Make sure you use simple sentences with your flashcards and don't try to put too much information on them.

Input is best used in mass amounts. Keep in mind the principle **Use the language in order to learn it**: use input that is both comprehensible and interesting to you.

Use dictionaries to search for key unknown words. Use it once you have first attempted to understand the text you are using and have completed the paragraph you encountered it in.

Chapter 7

The Two Best Activities to Learn Your Language

Before we finish the first part of this guide, we need to look at two activities that are so important to successful intermediate language learning that they deserve their own chapter. These are non-essential for the beginner; however, many beginners do start doing them, so they are placed here. If you do little else, you can still be a successful intermediate learner simply by doing two things: 1, conversation practice, and 2, extensive reading.

7.1 Conversation practice

The purpose of language is communication and to communicate you need to speak. Conversation is a great exercise because it gets your brain actively utilising the knowledge you already have, greatly improving your understanding and fluency with the language. It also exercises the skills of speaking and listening in tandem, it exposes you to native speaker content, exposes you to new forms and vocabulary, and lets you get help and feedback in real time. Many learners report a burst of insight that can come from beginning to speak as their target language turns from memorised rules and phrases into a living language that they can interact with.

Principle: Get feedback on your ability

A good way to catch errors is to find ways to get feedback on any mistakes you are making. While your language should get better with time on its own, it can be helpful to catch some mistakes you are repeatedly producing so that they don't become a permanent feature of your speech or writing. Try asking for feedback from your tutor or language partner. You can also try your hand at writing and sending small texts to native speakers to be corrected.

Other than listening and speaking skill, which has already been addressed, there are three common barriers learners experience beginning to speak. I will address each of them with a section. They are:

- Knowing when to start speaking
- How to get conversation practice
- Confidence

When to start speaking

Some people emphasise speaking as early as possible, even on the first day. The first time speaking a language can be a powerful experience, as well as great way to solidify knowledge recently

gained. Keep in mind that speaking can be very hard for beginners without a tutor or highly accommodating language partner. In addition, there is plenty to be gained by doing other activities and leaving speaking for later. For that reason, it is a completely valid and common choice to avoid speaking almost entirely until you are at a lower-intermediate level. Many people find speaking helpful and prefer to start earlier, while others only speak early because they find it fun or motivating. When to begin speaking is your choice—there is no proven best time.

How to get conversation practice

The best way to practise speaking is to find a native speaker and start a language exchange, an activity in which you each spend time speaking each other's language. You can do this by organising with people in your real life if you have any native speakers around. If you are like the majority of us and do not have anybody nearby, the best option is to do an online exchange using Skype or any other internet calling service. You can find people very easily by using a community dedicated to language exchanges. The largest and most popular communities are [Tandem](#) and [HelloTalk](#). More are listed in the [language exchange section](#) of the [r/languagelearning](#) wiki.

There are other methods of getting practice. If you live in a big city, there are often meetups for language enthusiasts or more generic meetups that are often attended by expatriates and travellers. You might get lucky and find a native speaker there who is willing to let you practise if you ask them. The country associated with your language may have a community of speakers in your city. You can also pay for a tutor to get conversation practice, either online or in real life if available.

Building confidence

The next big barrier to fluent speech is usually a lack of confidence. Having the confidence to just try even if you might be wrong ensures you maximise your opportunity to practice speaking.

If you are feeling nervous or anxious about starting to speak, it is best to ease yourself in. Find a good conversation partner. Most people will be accommodating. A good partner will understand your level and speak at an appropriate level for you. In return, any help they give using your language will be good practice for them. Make sure you are clear about your level and your initial difficulty will not be a problem. If you have the money, hiring a tutor can be a good way to ease yourself into speaking with less pressure.

The initial hurdle of starting to speak is the largest, but there is no way around it. After that, speaking becomes increasingly easier, even when first speaking any future languages you may learn.

Key tip: Don't be afraid to make mistakes

Don't shy away from trying things because you are afraid of making mistakes. Mistakes are a natural part of the process of learning and will not necessarily hinder your progress. Conversely, trying to use the language absolutely correctly every time can slow your progress by reducing the amount of practice you get.

Most mistakes simply fix themselves over time without correction. As long as you are getting lots of input and basing your language production off that, you will probably be fine. Listen closely next time you are near a young child. They make mistakes all the time, yet all will learn to a native level given enough time.

For more information, read [the section on mistakes](#).

7.2 Extensive reading

Reading is probably the best way to continue to improve your understanding of vocabulary and grammar. It is a great exercise, even if your objective is to speak.¹ Vocabulary size is strongly correlated with time spent reading,² so it's a great way to boost your vocabulary.

There is nothing objectively wrong with listening instead, however written content has everything easily accessible to be referenced, returned to, and looked up. It is also better in terms of sheer quantity of content available to learners, meaning there are more things that interest you available in the written form. Reading and listening are simply different ways of accessing the core components (vocabulary and grammar), which remain largely unchanged between the two content types. Feel free to listen to audiobooks or podcasts if you prefer.

The key to extensive reading is that you read widely and a lot. Use the [suggestions from the resources section](#) to find some good tools and content to read.

Find a book

The most common way learners tend to get lots of language exposure is by finding a book they enjoy reading. Graded readers, which are tailored to your level, are ideal. However, learners often find books for teens or even pre-teens that they enjoy enough to read. If the book is a translation of one you have already read in your native language, that will help you read a more difficult book without losing track of what is happening. Here are some books commonly re-read by learners:

- The *Harry Potter* series
- The *Goosebumps* series
- *The Little Prince*

In addition, there are books written specifically for learners at various levels. You can find them on Amazon.

¹Elaboration in the section [Should I read if my goal is conversation?](#)

²Source: [Test your vocab: the blog](#)

Chapter 8

The End of Part One

This concludes the core knowledge you need to be an effective beginner learner. If you're eager to start, you can stop here and start studying. Good luck!

Before you leave, it will be helpful for you to read the quick summary below.

If you want to, you can read on to get some more language learning advice tailored to intermediate learners.

8.1 Summary of the book up until now

Here are four key ideas that underpin your learning:

1. Use the language in order to learn it
2. Work towards your goals
3. Time with the language is the key to how fast you will learn
4. Keep up your motivation

Use a beginner course to structure your learning. Make sure you follow others' recommendations but prioritise what you enjoy using. Choose a course that works for you and progress with it in a way that you enjoy. Do not rely on your course to make you learn. You will learn once you use the new words and forms you encounter in your course by drilling and seeing them in your input.

Use flashcards to drill grammar and vocabulary. Words are the biggest barrier to comprehension, so focus on them if you want to understand more. Using sentences is ideal. Learn to make your own flashcards and add in words you encounter in your course and input.

Listen and read as much as you can using content that is interesting and comprehensible. YouTube, Google, and language-specific communities are your best shot at finding good content.

Finally, **practise your language by reading widely and getting conversation practice with native speakers.**

Chapter 9

Moving to the Intermediate Stage

The intermediate stage begins around the point you stop following a structured syllabus. Your beginner course will either have finished or moved on to advanced grammar. At this point, learning becomes more self-directed based on your goals.

9.1 Intermediate study routine

The study routine of an intermediate learner is quite different to that of a beginner:

- There is less structured learning of grammar
- Writing and speaking will start to feature much more prominently
- Choosing what to study next is your choice
- A lot of interesting content opens up as understanding increases
- Learning becomes more goal-directed

While some things change, many aspects are still useful:

- Drilling key forms and words is still a useful activity to target key weaknesses
- Flashcards are still a useful resource—while some learners use flashcards less, others increase their usage because they like to consciously focus on improving their vocabulary
- Content is still essential

There is a huge amount of nuance to grammar and vocabulary usage, so the only way to properly absorb it all is with content. Nearly everything you do will be centred around content.

Principle: Trust the process

A common learner complaint is that learning seems to slow down at a certain point. This can lead to frustration at a seeming lack of progress. These natural plateaus will occur often in your learning. This happens to everyone. It is a natural part of learning a language and has more to do with how language learning works than anything to do with you. The best fix is to simply power through it. Continue using input, challenge yourself to improve, and, most importantly, **trust the process**. You will progress, I promise. Read the r/languagelearning FAQ entry [here](#) for more info.

9.2 What should I study?

Two fundamental factors weigh on your choice of what to study:

1. Your goals
2. Your weaknesses

Your goals

The best activities for study either closely simulate or match your goals. For example, if you are learning a language for its literature, reading a book is a perfect exercise. If your goal is to have conversations, your focus should be on listening and speaking activities.

Key tip: Narrow your learning

If you have a specific context you want to be highly competent in, such as work or family, your choice of input and vocabulary can differ from a more evenly balanced approach. Narrowing your learning allows you to effectively reach a higher level much faster and can be more enjoyable. Start by tailoring the resources you use and using content that aligns with the contexts you need the language for. For example, if you want to learn for business purposes, interviews (podcasts or videos) of experts and articles in business publications are more useful. Your goal may emphasise certain skills, and this same principle applies. For example, if you want to be able to communicate with ordinary people in public, you should utilise audio resources and speaking practice more.

Your weaknesses

A weakness is anything that prevents you successfully completing your goal. Based on your experience engaging with your goals, try to decide what is most holding you back. For example, if you can read but struggle to watch TV shows without subtitles, you may need to work on your aural comprehension.

If you're not sure, it's a good bet your vocabulary is holding you back at least somewhat. A fluent speaker of English knows over 10,000 words, and you're probably not there yet.

Once you've identified a weakness, choose resources and do activities that let you improve that aspect or skill you are lacking in. For example, you may choose podcasts because you struggle to understand spoken language, or you may pick some written content that interests you to help you learn words.

What do I need to know?

To help you think about your weaknesses, here is a list of things you can aim to improve. This list is not comprehensive. What is most important will depend on your target language.

Table 9.1: *Potential weaknesses to focus on*

Core component or skill	Aspect
Grammar	Function of verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs Tense Mood Number Gender Word order Suffixes Other grammar (language-dependent)
Vocabulary	Number of words known Prepositions and other particles Collocations Common phrases
Reading	Spelling Characters known (for languages like Chinese or Japanese)
Listening	Sound perception Distinguishing words Speed of comprehension
Speaking	Phonetics Tone Intonation Fluidity and pace
Writing	Spelling Writing speed

Principle: 80 percent of your results come from 20 percent of your study

Otherwise known as the [Pareto Principle](#), this principle is applied to basically every field out there and has its origins in management theory. This principle is not a fundamental law, but the observation that the fastest progress can be made by focusing on a certain subset of issues that are having the largest impact on performance.

Applying it to language learning, the principle states that for any domain of your target language, fixing the biggest 20% of your issues will achieve 80% of the impact you can get in that domain. Similarly, 20% of your study time is probably achieving 80% of your results. Some activities you are doing are probably having a minimal impact, while some smaller gaps in your knowledge are probably having an outsized impact on your ability to communicate. Think about what activities seem to give you the biggest improvements and re-assess your study routine.

Chapter 10

Language Learning Activities

All activities fall into one (or more) of three categories:

1. **Meaning-focused**—Large amounts of natural language are required to learn a language, so the learner should be seeking out and engaging with large amounts of input. The goal is simply to expose yourself to as much of the language as possible and generally understand what is happening. It will be helpful to become comfortable with an incomplete understanding of what you read or hear.
2. **Language-focused**—This is when you utilise some smaller piece of content to attempt focused improvement at a specific component or skill, such as a grammar concept, vocabulary, natural phrases, or aural comprehension. This is the closest to a typical desk study session. Resources used for language-focused learning are often more difficult than those you would use for meaning-focused learning.
3. **Fluency-focused**—Exercises aimed at helping you improve the speed at which you can use language you already know, focusing on the four skills. If you use content, you will generally use it for some specific component and focus only on that. Typical fluency-focused activities involve pronunciation.

How much you do of each is up to you, though the nature of meaning-focused language learning activities means they will likely take most of your time.

Next we will look at some activities for you to consider doing. You don't have to do all of these; in fact, people commonly get away with doing only a few.

Table 10.1: *Meaning-focused activities*

Activity	Description
Extensive reading	Already mentioned above. Reading as much as possible and on a wide range of subjects. The goal is to be exposed to as much vocabulary as possible while still understanding what you read, even if not fully.
Narrow reading	Staying within a specific topic area when reading can help you encounter many of the same words over and over to improve your vocabulary retention. It can also help you target the kind of vocabulary you learn. You can achieve this by following the same topic in the news or reading about a specialist area of knowledge you already know about.
Conversation practice	Already mentioned above. Talking and listening to native speakers in real conversation is highly beneficial.
Reading while listening	Helps you get used to sounds while reading, as well as improving comprehension over simply listening.
Listening to audio	This works like extensive and narrow reading, but by listening to podcasts or radio. This can be notably harder since listening is a more difficult skill to master.
Read and write	Try reading and then writing a short article about a topic. If you want to mix it up, you don't have to read, but can instead watch or listen and write.

Table 10.2: *Language-focused activities*

Activity	Description
Intensive reading	This means carefully reading a specific text with the objective of learning a new piece of language. Your goal is to gradually understand the text by working out the meaning of the parts you do not understand at first.
Memorising sentences, dialogues, or words using flashcards or other tools	This technique is well covered under the sections on flashcards.
Writing new forms and words down	Self-explanatory. Many people find the act of writing to be helpful for memorisation.
Translating between languages	If you have a dual-language text, you might try to translate your native into your target language, then compare your translation to the actual text.
Delayed copying	Using a rather small text (approx. 200 words), read it first to understand it, then follow up by going through, trying to remember the first four or five words and writing them on a piece of paper without referring back to the text. You can gradually increase the number of words. This helps you hold longer and longer phrases in your head.
Writing practice	Write something and send it to a native to be corrected. Optionally, write a follow-up text integrating what you have learned.

Table 10.3: *Fluency-focused activities*

Activity	Description
Listening for sounds	Focusing on sounds rather than meaning to hear how words sound in connected speech.
Shadowing	Listening to dialogues with text and trying to mimic the speakers as closely as possible. After a few repetitions you can try to speak over top of them. Helps work on intonation and pronunciation.
Repeated writing	Writing, getting it checked and corrected, looking at it carefully, putting it away, and then writing it again from memory.
Repeated speaking	Record yourself speaking a text and play it back, listen and compare to a native.

Key tip: Make sure you get some variety

Try to do study involving at least a little bit of each of the four skills. A bit of everything will allow each skill to build on the other. For example, reading a lot will help your speaking, but even speaking every now and then will aid your reading by making words and concepts more salient in your mind.

10.1 Language-focused learning with content

Since language-focused learning is going to be one of your most effective types of exercise, it will be helpful to look at how to do it with content in more detail.

The key is this: **language-focused learning using content will require multiple passes.** Trying to use and understand the entirety of text, audio, or video content at once is usually too difficult. It's impossible to remember the meaning of all new words and forms as well as comprehend the meaning of entire sentences and how they flow together to make a broader point on your first read through. The best approach is to chunk it up into manageable activities so that nothing is too difficult. You should frequently read or listen to your content multiple times (up to ten, even). Repetition is a powerful principle that ensures you remember what you learn. In each reading you will read more carefully and try to gain new insight. Here is a good order:

1. Skim read for broader context—lets you derive meaning from context more easily
2. Brief read—read without looking anything up, try to guess more meaning
3. Deeper read—read again, getting definitions for key words to let you understand the text
By now you'll have a good idea of what words/forms you are struggling with. From that point, you can decide what kind of exercise you want to use it for. These next points imagine you decide to use it for intensive reading:
4. Another deeper reading—this time, focusing on those bits that are new to you
5. As many repeat readings as necessary, each time focusing on a different aspect

At the end you can make a final pass, using all the new knowledge you have just gained to understand the text much better. If by the end you can comfortably understand the content, congratulations! You are now measurably better at your target language

There are lots of other ways you might like to access it. Here are some more ideas for an audio + transcript resource:

- Practise listening to an audio recording
- Drill some key vocabulary with flashcards
- Produce a verbal or written summary of the resource
- Read the text aloud focusing on speed and fluidity

- Record own version of the dialogue and compare it to the pronunciation of the characters
- Send the written summary to a native to be corrected
- Discuss the dialogue with a tutor

Principle: Noticing

A great way to passively pick up grammar and vocabulary is by simply noticing. That means noticing words and constructions you have had explained to you before and recalling their function and meaning while using content. As you engage with your content, previously unknown forms gradually will become clear to you.

Keep an eye out for new unknown forms or words as you read. Noticing something, becoming curious, searching for a word, and learning its meaning is a very powerful way to learn. Looking things up every time is usually not practical. Instead, try to be aware so that you can spot common forms, eventually looking them up once you encounter them enough that you have an idea of how they are used.

Chapter 11

How learning happens

This chapter is going to return to the idea we discussed earlier about effective language learning and doing the right kinds of exercises. However, instead of simply telling you what works, I am aiming to give you a framework to assess if **any** activity you are doing is really helping you achieve your goals. You can apply this knowledge to the above chapter on activities.

11.1 Drilling and practice

There are two fundamental types of study: Drill or practice.

Drilling is the act of trying to improve a specific component of language. Usually this is something that is too difficult to focus on when you are trying to practise. Drill is about improving on individual weaknesses without worrying as much about how they go together. These are the language- and fluency-focused activities.

Practice is everything else. It is using the language for your goal in an integrated fashion. Practice blends and hones the skills and knowledge you already have with less focus on gaining new knowledge. These are the meaning-focused activities.

You already do both of these plenty. I'm not teaching you a new skill, just labelling something you already do.

Drilling

Drilling is an effective way to fix weaknesses and improve at a faster rate. Drilling reduces your cognitive load and lets you focus improving on a single thing or subset of the full task.

Drill when you have identified a specific weakness important to your goals. You can drill grammar or vocabulary, or specific skills.

Here are some examples of common drills:

- Writing things down in a workbook
- Looking up words and concepts
- Exercises
- Flashcards (this is the most common)
- Practising speaking aloud and other fluency-focused activities

Drills don't have to be simple rote-learning activities. In fact, some drills are far superior to others. When you do a drill exercise, you should assess if it is truly helping you. A good drill exercise:

- uses real language as much as possible, such as the content you use
- simulates the part of the real-life situation you are looking to improve in
- is relevant to the weaknesses currently preventing you from achieving your goals
- focuses on building skills or knowledge crucial to understanding

A bad drill would:

- be irrelevant to the content you are using
- be irrelevant to your goals or weaknesses
- focus on aspects of the language that you will come to acquire through input anyway and that do not prevent you from understanding your content

It is also recommended to avoid drilling too much. A lot of the skills learners choose to drill will be developed over time with input anyway. This is why basic workbook grammar exercises are not a recommended drill. You'll get very good at doing tests, but what portion of that will easily transfer to your speaking? Not so much. Instead, your grammar practice needs to simulate more closely what you will encounter in your real life.

Practice

If you are not drilling, you are practising. Practising your language can either be done as your goal requires (goal-oriented practice), or you can practice your language more generally (non-goal-oriented practice). For example, if your goal is conversation, reading a book for fun can be considered non-goal-oriented practice. Goal-oriented practice is essential. Non-goal-oriented practice can be useful; however, it is usually slower at helping you achieve your goals.

Not all practice must be goal-oriented. You may:

- not be able to practise your goal
- want to use a good simulation of the same grammar, vocabulary, or skills your goal requires
- want to do something more fun
- need something a bit easier

All reasons are acceptable—it's far better to do something than nothing at all. However, you should keep in mind that your practice is not moving you towards your goals as fast. **As much as possible, your practice should be goal-oriented.**

Transfer

Transfer is the concept describing how knowledge and skill at one task applies to other situations, such as how our study of the components of a language translates into the ability to speak or do whatever our goal is. Transfer does not happen automatically.¹ Real-world skill at language (or any task) is a complex melding of its constituent skills that involves novel scenarios and unpredictability that drills can struggle to simulate.

Learners often substitute direct practice with a related task when they shouldn't. Those who want to communicate will pass time drilling grammar, vocabulary, or reading news. These tasks have their place but will not result in progress without a lot of practice. For example, getting good at reading won't translate into fluid conversation without practice talking.

Principle: Practice then drill

Take a deliberate approach of using practice to reveal your weaknesses and finding ways to improve them through drill. **Balance your drill time and with your practice time.** How you divide your time is up to you.

Both drill and practice will help you improve, but each has strengths and weaknesses that play off each other. It is useful to have a balance between the two. Excessive study without practice will not translate into skills that help you achieve your goals. Learning may become stale or you could lose track of what direction your learning is headed. Excessive practice without study could cause you to develop fossilised errors (this often occurs with people who speak a lot) or cause your rate of improvement to stagnate.

11.2 Mistakes

Earlier I discussed the need to let go of the fear of making mistakes so that you can practise more effectively, and this remains true. However, there are ways to learn faster and avoid making mistakes.

First, we need to mark an important distinction between mistakes and errors.

Mistakes are accidental. The learner knows they are wrong. For example, you might be taught to use the subjunctive in Spanish but will often forget to use it when you are speaking or writing. You would recognise the mistake if you had a chance to check your own output carefully.

Errors are incorrect use of the language caused by a learner's lack of knowledge. This could be failing to use the subjunctive because you are not aware it should be used in a certain context. In this case, you would still fail to correct yourself after checking your output.

Mistakes are a natural part of speaking and become less common over time with practice. Even native speakers occasionally make mistakes. Errors, on the other hand, tend to stay around much longer and are more difficult to fix. For that reason, it is errors rather than mistakes that we should be focusing on.

¹Tests of economic reasoning comparing college economics majors to other students showed a surprising lack of a difference between the two groups ([source](#))

There are two general sources of errors:

1. Your native language interferes with your target language
2. You misuse a rule or word due to a lack of experience

These sources are, of course, very normal parts of learning a language. In either case, you will probably eventually learn the correct form and the error will become a mistake and then eventually disappear. When this does not happen, this is known as fossilisation.

Fossilisation

Fossilisation is the process in which the learner acquires a specific form or way of speaking that is not native-like, and this error or mistake becomes stuck in the learner's speech. Fossilised errors and mistakes are often resistant to correction and the learner's efforts to change.

Fossilised errors arise when a learner repeatedly (and successfully, in terms of being understood) uses a certain form without being made aware that it is not native-like. This happens to the point of hearing and using it so often, it sounds natural and comes to mind easily. Fossilised mistakes usually start off as fossilised errors, but remain an unwelcome feature used habitually by the learner even after they are made consciously aware it is incorrect.

The good news is that doing things to avoid fossilisation is also generally good language learning technique. Here is how you can mitigate the risk of developing fossilised errors and mistakes:

1. Practice by learning the language in context. Use texts and videos over drills. (Principle: **Use the language in order to learn it**)
2. Focus on listening and reading. Don't feel like you have to start speaking early if you don't feel comfortable.
3. Try to be aware of how words and forms are used around you. Focus on shifting your speech to resemble more closely that of native speakers. (Principle: **Noticing**)
4. Get feedback or correction. This can be done by a friend, tutor, family member, or language exchange partner. Make sure they understand that you would like your errors to be corrected. Most people will avoid correcting others' speech to facilitate smooth conversation. (Principle: **Get feedback on your ability**)

11.3 How to approach language learning

This section is a continuation of the earlier section on your study schedule.

Principle: Good habits, routine, and discipline

Nobody ever achieved success without a good set of habits and the fortitude to continue when things weren't easy. Language learning is not always a smooth process, so it is important to maintain good habits that will serve you when progress feels slow and you are unmotivated.

Approach your study right

Part of a good method means approaching language learning with the right attitude.

Push yourself—during your study, you will inevitably find certain resources or content eventually become easy for you. At this point, the best technique is to move on. By continually challenging yourself, you will be constantly pushed to improve.

Maintain a growth mindset—A [growth mindset](#) is the belief that you are capable of improving. Don't let your beliefs about your own ability place limits on what you can achieve. Believing that you lack certain talents or will never reach a certain level will make it so. While talent provides a nice boost, anybody who got good at anything got there through thousands of hours of practice that you don't see. Achieving the same will take time and practice.

Cultivate curiosity—The best way to learn something is when there is as little resistance as possible, meaning your subconscious is prepped to acquire it based on relevance and usefulness to you. The mere act of “wanting” to know something seems to help. If you want to cultivate this effect, approach unfamiliar words and forms with a sense of curiosity. Prime your mind by genuinely trying to figure out how a word or form affects the meaning of the sentence before you look it up. It also helps if you encounter words multiple times, giving the word a sense of familiarity and importance.

Habit-building

One of the keys to sticking to your study is **habit**. Build a habit of studying at a regular time each day. The best time is usually first thing in the morning, while you are still fresh and probably don't have anything else scheduled. With a good habit, your automatic process should be to begin studying without you having to think about it. If you have to ask yourself “should I study or should I do something else?”, it takes mental effort to force yourself to study that will eventually wear you down over time. Instead, your default should be that time is dedicated to study. If you want to use that time for something else, you need to find valid and specific reason.

It helps a lot if your interaction with the language is consistent. Try not to take long breaks from learning. Do at least a little bit every day. Too tired? Just do five minutes. Those five minutes now keep you in the habit of doing something every day and keep the language active in your mind.

Try to intersperse your learning. Two 30-minute study periods a day are more effective than one hour at the end. One hour every day is far better than seven hours on Saturday and none during the rest of the week.

One key to maintaining your routine is discipline. Discipline is not an inherent trait, but a set of habits and mental tools that help one start projects and stay on-task. Not every day will you find it easy to keep your habit. If this is you, you may need to find ways to force yourself to at least begin studying. Try promising yourself to simply start with the intention of only doing five minutes. Usually you will find it easier to continue once you have already started.

Chapter 12

The Final Chapter

12.1 Second part summary

This part will have given you lots more activities to try and principles to integrate into your learning. The key ideas are:

- Speak a lot if you are learning to communicate
- Read a lot, read widely
- Don't be afraid to make mistakes
- Make your learning into a consistent habit
- Hunt down your weaknesses and focus on them with drills

12.2 Conclusion

Congratulations on making it to the end! You should now be in a comfortable position to learn a language all on your own. Having read it all once, the full guide is unlikely to stick in your mind, so be sure to save this guide somewhere and come back at a later date once you feel your study stagnating or you need some fresh ideas. There will probably be something here to help.

Next you will find a large set of appendices that provide more guidance on using flashcards, studying grammar and vocabulary, using content, and more. Be sure to check it out if you'd like some more ideas.

If you have gotten here by reading the whole thing, please take a moment to [send me an email](#) with any feedback or error corrections you may have, no matter how small. I am always trying to improve and your input is greatly appreciated.

Thank you for reading!

Appendix A

How to Learn Pronunciation

The advantage of learning good pronunciation is that it is probably the easiest way to sound fluent at an upper beginner or intermediate stage, and early effort will continue to help you throughout your language endeavours. If you're the outgoing type or are learning primarily to communicate verbally, good pronunciation is a good way to keep people happy conversing with you and get compliments on your skill.

Pronunciation is especially important for languages with very different phonology, such as Chinese. This is because the differences are so great as to make mispronunciation a barrier to communication. If you are learning a tonal language or one with many new sounds, consider paying closer attention to pronunciation.

Pronunciation can be split between sound, syllable, word, and sentence. Every target language has different rules governing these. This is known as the study of [phonetics](#), split between [phonology](#) and [prosody](#).

A.1 What to learn

Here are several aspects you will need to look out for in your practice:

Sound inventory: Every language has a set of distinct consonants and vowels. These sounds can be very different from English (such as tones and click consonants) or only slightly different. [Here](#) is the Wikipedia entry for the phonology of English to help you.

Tone: This is the use of tone to distinguish morphemes. This means two words can be identical but for their tone and carry completely different meanings. If your target language is a tonal language, such as Chinese or Hausa, you will need to become proficient in order to communicate.

Difficult sound clusters: Different languages have different rules surrounding which sounds can fit into a single syllable. This means some languages will have clusters of consonants you will find difficult to pronounce.

Stress: Languages have different rules around what syllables are stressed within words, as well as how they are stressed

Connected speech: Words flow together in a way that makes them sound different than if they were spoken individually. Notice how this sentence sounds different in your mind. when. I. type. the. last. part. like. this.

Intonation: This is pitch when used to convey other types of information. The most simple example is a rising pitch to indicate a question. Intonation is often used in other ways and these can differ between languages.

Rhythm and tempo: Languages are spoken with a different sense of pace and timing.

Sound inventory

The difficulty with learning new sounds is understanding precisely how to make them. Your best method for understanding is to learn some of the terminology around parts of the mouth and sounds.

Your best tool for learning the sounds of your language is the [IPA](#) (International Phonetic Alphabet). The IPA is a system of writing all the sounds of human language. Knowing the core sounds associated with your language and familiarity with their IPA symbol is very useful. You don't have to memorise every symbol—just familiarise yourself with the ones your target language uses. By googling any IPA symbol, you can find the Wikipedia article describing it, which has a sound file to help you.

Here are some useful key concepts to recognise. You don't need to know any of this right now, but some of them will come up in reference to the sounds of your target language and it will be helpful to recognise them. Use this reference when you are confused.

- [IPA Vowel Chart](#)
- [Place of articulation](#)
- [Manner of articulation](#)
- [Voicing](#)
- [Aspiration](#)
- [Click consonants](#)

The [Encyclopedia Britannica entry on phonetics](#) is a very useful reference for understanding the key concepts.

Difficult sound clusters

These are generally learned by practising them in isolation over and over. Consonant-heavy languages can be difficult to pronounce due to the clusters of consonants that can take some time getting used to.

Stress

For most learners, it is important to pay focused attention to where and how stress is placed on words. English stresses by a raising of pitch and lengthening of the vowel. In other languages, stress can be more subtle or expressed differently.

Here are some aspects of stress that may be relevant to your language:

- [Pitch accent](#)
- [Vowel reduction](#)

A.2 How to practise pronunciation

How easy your job is depends on how many resources exist on the internet. I recommend you search for pronunciation guides online. If you're lucky, you can find a guide somewhere that takes you through all the sounds and precisely how they are pronounced. The key is to identify the aspects that will be difficult for you based on differences between your native and target language and consciously practice these aspects.

It may take some time to train your ear. For a while, different sounds will seem the same to you, but if you persevere, they will eventually begin to sound different. Eventually, you will wonder how they ever sounded alike.

You don't need to learn everything about pronunciation at the start. A good understanding of each of the main sounds is sufficient. A lot of pronunciation skill comes naturally as you begin to talk more and try to bring your speech to resemble more closely that of native speakers you hear.

I recommend you plan out some sessions where you focus on pronunciation early on. Ideally, as soon as you first start trying to say words you should already have an idea of how to pronounce them correctly. To do this, you can use the suggested exercises below.

Exercises

As I mentioned, you will need to spend time isolating the aspects that are relevant to your language and focusing on improving them. Dedicate some time to doing some activities in which you practise speaking some words alone in front of your computer. You don't need to do this too much, just until your brain is made aware of what it needs to do to make the new sound. After that you can gradually integrate the sound naturally as you practice your language.

Use good dictionaries to help you. [Wiktionary](#) is the most consistent dictionary in showing the IPA pronunciation. [Forvo](#) is a great pronunciation dictionary.

Table A.1: Pronunciation activities

Activity	Description
Isolate sounds	You may need to get used to pronouncing individual sounds before you can use them correctly in words. You can do this using the Wikipedia articles for the IPA symbol associated with the sound you want to learn (example: English schwa). Play the audio and repeat it aloud.
Isolate words	Once you have the sounds roughly right, try to use them in a simple word. Use Forvo, Wiktionary, or any other dictionary that has audio to get a good example to mimic.
Correction with your conversation partner	Ask your partner to critique your pronunciation. They may have trouble identifying what you are doing wrong. This is why the IPA can be very useful.
Record yourself	Play back a recording of yourself reading a text. Even better is if you have a native audio recording you can compare it to. For single words you can just use Speech Jammer and increase the delay to max to hear yourself right away. This will take some getting used to.
Shadowing	Listen to an audio recording of a native speaker with a text reference and try to speak over them, copying their intonation, pace, and pronunciation.
Read aloud	If you study alone, try practising by reading aloud texts you are reading for study. It helps if the text also has a native audio recording. It is also helpful to practice throughout your study by trying to read flashcards or anything new you encounter aloud.

Overcoming the mental hurdle

One of the biggest hurdles to enabling adult learners to speak with a good accent is purely psychological. That is, we are afraid of sounding silly when we speak. The result is we default to the way that sounds the least silly to us—the sounds of our native language. It is important to understand that good pronunciation will initially feel very weird to you.

A helpful tip is to try speaking your target language with an exaggerated caricature of how people from that country speak your native language. More often than not, you will land much closer to a natural-seeming estimation of the correct pronunciation than by starting from the default of your native language.

Appendix B

The Core Resources

B.1 Further advice on flashcards

Should I use pictures instead of words?

Some people advocate using pictures instead of words to learn. The theory goes that using words interferes with the learning process by anchoring the learner to her native language. Recall that translations should be considered approximations of the true word only. If your chosen translation is understood with this in mind, there is unlikely to be any significant issue caused by using words instead of pictures. In addition, the kinds of words that lend themselves to using pictures such as concrete nouns rarely overlap with different words in a way that is different between languages. Overall, if you like pictures, use them, but there is nothing wrong with using words.

Learning through flashcards

Flashcards with phrases can serve as an effective method of absorbing useful structures and phrases. Generally, you will choose a phrase you want to have easy mental access to. This is because it can serve as a kind of mental “island” to reduce cognitive load when speaking or because it sheds light upon the usage of a grammatical construct. These phrases can function as a kind of template in which you swap out words or grammatical markers as necessary.

I recommend making the phrases personally relevant and interesting to you, since you’re going to be finding them anyway.

It is not recommended to build your own phrases unless you are sure it is native-like (i.e. you have made it with a native teacher). Because of that, you will have to either take the sentences from your content or use services that provide sentences. If you are lucky, the language you are learning has a good dictionary that also provides phrases (such as [Spanishdict](#) for Spanish learners), otherwise you will need to use another service.

Anki also provides pre-made decks which often have sentences. These can work too if you like them and the sentences are relevant and at your level. They can also save you time if you don’t have the time to build your own deck.

B.2 Further Advice on Using Content

Input is essential for four main reasons:

1. Languages are far too complex to be adequately described by any book or course. To be introduced to all the different ways and specific contexts words and forms can be used together, you need to be exposed to a lot of the language.

2. Input introduces you to new forms and words in context in a way that is interesting, which helps you remember.
3. Input gives repetition of words and forms that solidifies them in your memory.
4. Input builds your intuition for the language. This is what happens when certain things can just sound correct or incorrect without you having any explicit understanding of why. Much of your native language knowledge is intuition.

Key tip: Use context to help you learn

When using content, the context you encounter a new word or concept in can provide a useful hint as to its meaning. The situation, surrounding words, topic, and type of resource you're using all provide hints you can use that let you guess at the meaning of something. Even if you're not sure, encountering something in context enough will gradually help you understand. At all times avoid trying to learn new words or forms in isolation.

Your level +1 in your content

As we noted, the definition of +1 depends on what you are doing with the content. Here are some examples to help you think about it.

Imagine your listening level is comparatively low. An audio dialogue with all known words would still present a challenge for your ears. Utilising this principle, you would use this resource focusing only on your ability to hear different words. You may also want to do a first pass over a text version of the audio so you know what to expect. Be careful though, you don't want to listen simply relying on having near-memorised the text.

If you want to finish a long text, you are reading without a dictionary, or you just want to expose yourself to as much of the language as possible without stopping to look up words, 98% known words is closer to the ideal +1 amount. If you are prepared for a careful study session and want to make multiple passes over the same text, 90% is acceptable. If 90% sounds high to you, try [this](#) and see what 80% comprehension feels like.

In addition, real word factors such as resource availability often result in the learner using resources that are slightly too difficult. This is okay, but if you understand less than 80% of the vocabulary, you should strongly consider abandoning that resource regardless.

Appendix C

Further Advice on Learning Vocabulary

Learning words is such a large topic that it doesn't easily fit in a beginner-oriented guide. To help anyone interested, I have placed a large amount of useful information here.

C.1 Mnemonics

Mnemonics are versatile tool that turns vocabulary into easy-to-recall mental images that help you remember a word. Mnemonics can be very useful to learn vocabulary quickly, however the word won't be truly learned until you don't need the mnemonic and can use and understand the word automatically. Mnemonics are a useful tool to improve your recall, not an easy way out of having to absorb the language.

The most common method is the **keyword method**. This links the word you want to learn to a similar-sounding word in your native language. For example: Imagine you want to learn the French word for *car*: *voiture*. You might note that the word *voiture* sounds like *vulture* in English. You can mentally link the two by imagining a car with a vulture on top of it, or, if you are very imaginative, that someone built a car shaped like a vulture. Now, when you want to talk about a car, you'll remember the vulture on top and that the French word sounds like *vulture*. The more vivid, bizarre, or surprising your mnemonics are, the more effective they will be. You will be surprised by how well they work.

Further details are too much for a guide such as this, so I will provide you with some links to learn more on your own if you are interested.

- [A general overview](#)
- [A quick explanation on how to use mnemonics for vocabulary](#)
- [The memory palace technique](#)

C.2 Multi-word phrases

Many words have meanings that are closely tied to the meaning of words next to them, and the meaning of the whole may have little relation to their meaning when taken in isolation. Some examples in English include *of course*, *come what may*, *big cheese*, or *early bird*. Think of these as discrete bits of vocabulary to be learned together. Constituent words should be thought of as aides to help you form associations. It is important to also learn these kinds of phrases in your study. Often this is done with flashcards.

C.3 Focus on words that don't directly translate

Most words in your target language will have a relatively straightforward equivalent, particularly if you are learning a language that is closely related to English. For the most part, the words *dog*, *shoot*, and *tree* all have a simple translation you can memorise. However, there will always be words that don't quite fit with how you think of them in English. Among these words will be words that have a significantly expanded range of uses compared to the direct English translation. It is important to learn the most common of these. Take, for example, the Spanish word *poner* (*put* in English). *Poner* is used in a variety of phrases where a native English speaker might not expect, such as *ponerse de pie*, which simply means *stand up*.

Consciously learning the many different meanings of these words is a good way of avoiding common learner mistakes and making your speech sound more natural. In this case, you'd need to put focused effort into the many definitions of *poner* as if it were several words rather than one. This will be greatly helped by using example sentences in your flashcards.

On the other hand, there are also common English words with many meanings where your target language may have several words instead. These are much harder to spot. The best you can do is watch for phrases where you think *I'd have translated that differently*.

C.4 Logical connections help you learn words

Words are often composed of smaller root words and particles that can help you understand their meaning. Take the English word *destruction*. This contains the prefix *de-*, the noun *structure*, and the suffix *-tion*. The meaning of this word might be easy to guess as a native, but it wouldn't be so easy if you weren't familiar with its parts. Being familiar with the constituent parts of a word makes learning its meaning easier.

Many words are derived from others and form a grouping of related words. For example, understanding the English root *mech-* can help you remember or derive the meaning of many words, such as *mechanic*, *mechanical*, and *mechanised*. You can use this type of association to link known words to similar-sounding known ones. Some root words have derivations that may not be immediately obvious. For example, the root *-spir-* is the link between the words *inspire*, *respire*, and *spirit*. The associations you use to help you remember words may be more abstract because of this.

Take advantage of these connections by trying to spot them where possible. You should also try to avoid learning large words if you don't know anything about their constituents.

You can also spot similarities between words in your target and native languages. For example, the English word *citizen* and French word *citoyen*.

Appendix D

How the Brain Learns

The following appendix is a set of discussions on how learning happens in our minds, applied to language learning specifically. While I reference language learning throughout, the sources for this info come from elsewhere and can be applied more generally.

D.1 Learning is a subconscious process

It is primarily subconscious processes that mark something as important and enable us to remember something. Learning something that has no obvious relevance to your life, you haven't needed to use, and has no relation to anything else you know can be hard. First learning something completely new constitutes a mental "hurdle". That is, learning basically requires pure memorisation. This type of memorisation is very, very difficult to do relative to other methods. There is a high degree of mental "resistance"—meaning it seems hard to get it to stick in your memory.

As much as possible, try to use context, logical connections, and personal connections to prime your brain for understanding.

D.2 Top-down and bottom-up processing

When trying to understand something, the human brain uses two broad processes: top-down and bottom-up.

Top-down processing involves using context to make deductions about what some content is about. **Bottom-up processing** involves understanding the pieces to build up to a coherent whole. Using both helps you learn new words and constructions from context.

For example: while watching a video you encounter a new word. You might note that the speaker appears to be indicating an apple in their hand. In this case, top-down processing involves picking up that the word means "apple" naturally.

Bottom-up processing is any word or form you already know that helps you understand the sentence. Pausing a video to try to recall the function of a form you just heard is a good example of bottom-up processing being practised and applied to learn effectively.

When engaging with content, both processes work in tandem to help you apprehend meaning in real time. Knowing this lets you take advantage of it. Before you start something, make sure you understand the context and have formed expectations surrounding what the resource is going to show you. One common method of doing this is beginning a text by skim reading or starting a TV episode with a plot summary.

D.3 Chunks

Which ordering of letters do you think is easier to memorise: “*orhezo esn rinyg bivi*”, or “*snoozing by the river*”? You would probably find the latter much easier to remember, though both contain the exact same letters. This is because the phrase already has meaning to you and you are familiar with the constituent words. You don’t need to memorise the letters because you’ve already memorised the correct spelling of each word.

This idea of already-learned aspects of language is a concept we will refer to as **chunks**. The concept was brought into the public consciousness by Barbara Oakley, who posted a good overview of the idea [here](#). Known aspects of language constitute chunks which don’t require effort for you to comprehend or use. These known chunks are an aide that will help teach you how the new word or piece of grammar is used.

It is far easier to learn something new when other aspects you are presented with at the same time are already easily understandable. For example, learning the meaning and usage of a new word in an example sentence will be much easier if you already know all the other words, just like how it is much easier to remember all those letters once they are organised into words. Grammar will be easier to memorise if one concept is presented to you at a time using words you already know.

Building new chunks is difficult and takes focused effort. The core idea of this principle is that **it is almost impossible to learn a lot of new chunks of language at once**. Learning using a text or example sentences chock full of new grammatical constructions and words might seem like a really efficient way of learning, but there will be no familiar connections or context to aid understanding, and your learning will actually be slower. Recollection will be particularly hard, akin to recalling random letters in order. Focusing on learning a single aspect at a time allows you to build new chunks easily while minimising the chance of forgetting. The additional context provided by known chunks will assist you in understanding the new part.

This principle does not mean “*don’t try to learn quickly*”. It means that when you learn a new word or grammatical construction, you will learn it much faster if it is presented to you in the context of other chunks of language that are already familiar to you. If you are learning something difficult, learn that difficult thing in context of already known things and rely on that context and knowledge to help you learn. The texts you use to learn should already be mostly comprehensible, and learning words or grammar is best done with understandable context, either in text or with example sentences for your flashcards.

D.4 Difficulty + successful recall

When you encounter a something recently learned, the general stages are as follows:

1. **Confusion/uncertainty**—The learner finds something unclear when they first encounter it in their content.
2. **Mental effort**—Mental effort is expended trying to recall a word or concept to use it. This is where the most powerful learning happens.
3. **Insight**—The mental effort pays off, and the learner successfully grasps meaning using their new knowledge.

4. **Repetition**—Each time the new word or concept is encountered it becomes easier.

Your brain learns optimally when you encounter something, **expend mental effort**, and eventually succeed. To ensure your mental effort results in learning, aim for just the right amount of difficulty—not too difficult that something presents an insurmountable barrier, but not so easy that you don't learn anything new.

To do this, your language learning needs to be laddered. This means you avoid doing activities that are too much of a struggle until you are able to do slightly easier ones. If you constantly find yourself struggling without understanding, you need to find an easier activity.

Often you will struggle to recall the meaning of a word or form and will be forced to look it up. This is perfectly natural and very common. While re-looking things up helps learning, it is not optimal. Try to find ways to prompt yourself to remember the answer. Try to encounter new words or forms again soon after you first learn them. If too much time passes, you'll spend mental effort trying to recall something that is gone.

D.5 Active recall

Active recall is the active use of memory during the learning process. It requires focused attention on recalling and using information to improve your language skill. This can be contrasted with passive learning, where you allow knowledge to come to you in a passive way without actively straining to decode meaning or recall a concept. For example, relaxing and watching a TV show or reading over your study notes.

While passive activities such as simply watching a show are generally much more enjoyable and easier to do in large amounts, active recall is more efficient in terms of progress per hour spent. Active learning by using your content for focused study will let you gain new knowledge faster. At the same time, learning a language takes enormous amounts of input and there is no way to realistically expose yourself to all the forms and words you need without large amounts of passive learning.

Be sure you are doing both types of learning. You may find it better to use more difficult resources for active learning and easier ones for passive learning.

Appendix E

Common Questions

E.1 Can I learn two languages at once?

There is nothing inherently wrong with learning two languages at once and you can learn them without mixing them up. I advise you only actively learn one language at a time. This is because learning another takes time away from the first. If you want to pick up another language, it is best to wait until you are at least at an intermediate level before you change language. This lets you actively learn one while maintaining the other using content you find interesting.

E.2 Can I learn like a child?

A common idea in the language community is that because children learn their first language to a high level, the adult learner can succeed by aiming to emulate the way children learn as much as possible. This advice comes in two forms: 1, that you don't need to formally study a language to learn it and 2, that you should immerse yourself as much as possible. Both are correct in their own way, but I am going to refine this advice a bit.

While children do learn their native languages very well, it takes around ten years of complete immersion to get there and another ten to become a fully functional adult.

To fully acquire languages, enormous amounts of input are necessary. Children are given far more comprehensible input than adults and, without the grammar book or dictionary, are generally much slower at acquiring basic forms and wait a lot longer than adults before they try speaking. Once they do acquire these forms and start speaking, however, there is no example for them to follow except that of perfect native speech. Also keep in mind that by the time they are an adult, the child will have spent an enormous amount of time in school practising their language skills and having their output critiqued. [This video](#) by Tom Scott provides a great overview.

Adult speakers frequently learn rules and then quickly move to applying them by speaking. The result is that most of the adult's first attempts at communication will not resemble native speech.

For those adult learners who want to speak like a native, the answer is not to attempt to learn like a child, but to surround themselves with as much comprehensible input as possible. Adult language learners can also spend time in focused study to find and improve weaknesses and learn words and complex forms faster.

You can read the article I wrote on the topic [here](#) for more information.

E.3 Why do some people seem to know lots of languages?

While it is true that learning a language to a high or close-to-native level takes a lot of time, it's also true that you'll see a lot of people truthfully claiming to be conversational in many languages.

As we noted earlier in the section [How you progress](#), language learning progress is significantly faster at the beginner and early intermediate stages. You can get very far with basic grammar and a small vocabulary. Often, the true barrier to being conversational at that level is skill speaking and listening and having the confidence to try.

If you'd like to be conversational in a lot of languages, you can do so without needing any special technique or talent. In fact, much of it is just good language learning as described here where the learner has fully integrated the principle [Work towards your goals](#) and focused heavily on conversational skill. You can read the [r/languagelearning FAQ entry](#) for more info.

E.4 How important are grammar lessons?

The opinions of the community on the efficacy of using grammar instruction vary greatly. Some consider it a needless distraction, useful only at the very beginning, while others consider it essential, and continue to study it well into the intermediate stage. Most people sit somewhere in-between. As a rule of thumb, you can get away with studying grammar less and less as you progress, but it will be helpful to occasionally or even continually refer to grammar explanations when you notice something and you are not sure why it is formed that way.

If you want to minimise the usage of grammar instruction, good technique is required. You will need to make sure you are noticing grammatical forms and incorporating native-like elements into your speech and writing.

E.5 What's wrong with how schools teach languages?

Language learning in schools suffers from 5 main problems that make it very inefficient:

1. **They use poor technique**—Learning optimally happens when there is just a bit of struggle. Enough to make the brain work but not too much the learner can't succeed without looking at the answer. Schools typically explain a concept once and then force you to fill out stale grammar exercises. This is not an efficient method because the gap between present knowledge and that required for the activity is too large, leaving the learner feeling frustrated.
2. **They focus far too much on grammar**—The majority of successful language learners will tell you to focus on speaking and reading more, as this time will actually help you learn the grammar better and faster than doing exercises. If you like grammar, you are free to focus heavily on it, though a lot of people do not.
3. **They are not timed well**—Learning languages takes a lot of time and practice, and languages require active usage and integration into your life in order to improve at a decent speed. The school format of spending a limited and segmented time with a subject while being completely isolated from it at other times is inefficient for languages.
4. **They teach to a test**—Your learning is determined by your own goals. Build your skills towards fulfilling that goal. Assess your own progress by thinking about how much closer

you are to achieving it. Skills with grammar exercises help you succeed in tests—they don’t help much in the real world.

5. **They can be overly structured**—If you only study a topic for a few lessons then move on without a chance to continue to use and practise your new knowledge, you will find yourself gradually forgetting it all. Languages are best learned by actively using them, not segmenting them into a series of topics that need to be rote learned.

E.6 Why is the term “language hacks” a misnomer?

Plenty of things labelled “language hacks” are great advice—this is not a case against using them. The term tends to encompass several distinct things, including effective study exercises, marginally helpful tricks, useful advice, and powerful foundational principles. In addition, the term “language hacks” implies to a general audience that they can learn a language quickly and easily by simply “hacking a language”, which would in turn imply they are taking advantage of something within the language itself. To achieve mastery your brain requires thousands of hours of input. You cannot hack your way around this requirement.

You absolutely can learn faster and more effectively by following a few principles. These principles are derived from our collective knowledge of how to learn effectively in any domain, applied to language learning. They let you learn faster and choose your objectives more intelligently. For that reason, the term “principle” is used throughout this guide. You could comfortably call most of what you read here “hacks”, but that would not leave the reader with any more clarity over what “hacking” really is. Using the “principle” framework, the learner better grasps what is required of them and why it is recommended to do something a certain way.

E.7 Should I read if my goal is conversation?

In this guide I discuss the importance of engaging with lots of content, often written. Why then should you engage with written content if your goal is to speak? Reading is a good way to encounter new vocabulary or grammar and focus on learning it. In addition, the written form is a good simulation of the spoken language, containing most of the same grammar and vocabulary.

You need to spend a lot of time with the language, but learners often can’t engage directly with their goal—perhaps there are no speakers around—so it can be helpful to use a substitute.

Appendix F

The Principles

F.1 Principles of approach

- **Work towards your goals**—practice whatever tasks you are learning the language for
- **Keep up your motivation**—find ways to stay interested in the language
- **Good habits, routine, and discipline**—build a strong study habit
- **Trust the process**—you will progress with time
- **80 percent of your results come from 20 percent of your study**—find the most effective activities and biggest weaknesses and focus on them

F.2 Principles of learning

- **Use the language in order to learn it**—listen and read as much as possible, you will learn the language when you use it, not when you learn about it
- **Repetition helps you learn**—you need to encounter something a lot before you learn it
- **Noticing**—Noticing forms in your content is a powerful way to learn
- **Don't try to learn things perfectly first time**—you need to see the language in context a lot before it will stick in your mind

F.3 Principles of practice

- **Get feedback on your ability**—feedback helps you catch errors
- **Your level +1**—use content just a bit above your level
- **Practice then drill**—find weaknesses in your language skill then isolate them with drills

Appendix G

Recommended Reading

Here you can find links to all the useful sources that have informed this guide:

- Kaufmann, Steve—[Personal Blog](#)
- Krashen, Stephen—[Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition](#)
- Lampariello, Luca—[Personal Blog](#)
- Lomb, Kato—[Polyglot: How I learn languages](#)
- Nation, Paul—[What do you need to know to learn a foreign language?](#)
- Richards, Olly—[Personal Blog](#)
- Young, Scott—[Ultralearning](#)

G.1 Podcasts

- [The Actual Fluency Podcast](#)
- [I Will Teach you a Language](#)

Appendix H

Choosing a Language

The first thing you need to do is consider your goals and motivations. Those factors that are most important to you are going to be the things that ensure you retain the long-term motivation required to learn a language. People choose a language for a multitude of reasons, here are some you might consider:

- **Personal interest**—Personal interest means you find the language inherently interesting and want to learn it for the joy of engaging with it. Some people learn languages because they think the grammar is cool, the language sounds beautiful, or they may simply like the culture, food, or music. Personal interest is generally a very powerful motivation that can persist for a lifetime.
- **Work**—Knowing a language can create job opportunities and improve the look of a CV. Generally, the languages chosen are widely spoken or are the language of a country that your own frequently trades with. While it's true more jobs benefit from fluency in Chinese, French or Spanish, other languages are still useful in a globalised world.
- **Utility**—Utility means how useful the language will be to you personally. The languages with the most utility are typically those that are spoken where you live. Utility also comes from learning the languages of places where you would like to live or visit. Because many learners learn to communicate, utility is often a very motivating factor.
- **Practicality**—This means availability of resources. If your target language is relatively obscure, resources in your native language may not be easily accessible. Difficulty finding resources or interesting content can severely hurt your motivation and interest, so learners who learn such languages are typically more motivated by other factors. Having family or close friends around that speak the language can mitigate the resource problem. Learners of more uncommon languages often use another more popular language as a bridge. For example, if you would like to learn Catalan, it will be helpful to learn Spanish first so you can use more resources.
- **Family**—This means relatives you wish to communicate with better or a family heritage language. If you want to use members of your family to practise with, it is a good idea to make sure they are willing to help first. Talking with a complete beginner is rarely an interesting task for the native speaker, and as a learner you will only become engaging to talk to once you are at least at an intermediate level.
- **Ease**—Languages that are more similar to ones you already know are significantly faster to learn. If you want to get to a communicative level faster, learning a similar language is better. If your only language is English, then the fastest languages to learn are Spanish, Swedish, Norwegian, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Italian. If the target language uses many different sounds, has little common vocabulary, or has a radically different grammar,

you must be willing to invest more time into it. For a quick idea, check the [FSI ranking](#), which serves as a rough approximation for someone who is dedicated but speaks only English. You can see that the hardest languages take over three times as long to reach a certain level as the easiest ones. While ease matters, in practice, people learning “harder” languages out of personal interest tend to be more successful than those who merely want to learn a language and simply pick the easiest. This is because the former has more motivation. Rather than thinking of difficulty, it is better to think in terms of the number of hours with the language it might take to reach a certain level. This is because languages you are bored by will be hard for you to stick with. You won’t enjoy the necessary hours of exposure. On the other hand, learning a language you love can be a lot of fun, even if it takes a bit longer.

The most important of these 6 categories is probably that of **personal interest**. Whatever language you really want to learn the most is the one you should probably choose. At the end of the day, you choose your own life priorities. What you prioritise needs to extend from what makes you happy. While the other five criteria can make you happy, they only do so indirectly. The consequences of learning an easy language or a language useful for your career are what make you happy. For languages you rank highly in personal interest, engaging with the language itself will be sufficient to give you fulfilment. This fulfilment will be necessary to spend the hundreds, eventually thousands, of hours you are going to spend with your chosen language.

Consider how important each of these categories of reasons are important to you and how the languages you are considering align with each of these. If you need to, write it down. By the end of this exercise, you should have a better idea which language you prefer.

H.1 Motivation

One of the biggest factors that determine your success is if you stick with the language you choose. You unlikely to learn a language you have no motivation to continue with. Consider if your reasons for learning are enough to keep you motivated. If not, you need to find a reason that will.

If there is some factor on your list that is important but you don’t feel it will motivate you to sit down and study, you need to consider why you feel that it’s important to consider in the first place. It may not be truly important to you.

Key tip: Spend some time trying them out

If you’re still undecided, I advise you spend a bit of time listening to and potentially even studying each. You could even spend some time learning about the languages as they relate to your priorities, such as culture, its usefulness in work, or what the difficult aspects might be. Any amount of time learning a language is useful for future languages because it helps you understand how language can work, and you will start to see similarities that make learning new concepts much easier.