How to Teach Yourself a Foreign Language

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Introduction

Welcome to *How to Teach Yourself a Foreign Language*, a fast, easy, no-nonsense way to get you learning any foreign language as effectively as possible. This guide will teach you the fundamental principles of learning languages. At the same time, it will help you understand what resources you need, where to find them, and what you should do to start learning. While this guide is primarily aimed at people who are not currently undertaking a structured course, there is plenty here for any learner—from beginner to upper-intermediate.

If you think something is missing or you have any queries, you can DM me on Reddit or send me an email.

This guide is written and maintained for the Reddit r/languagelearning community. Please check out the FAQ there to see some common beginner questions explicitly addressed.

How to use this guide

Please note: this guide will be faster to read than it may initially appear. There is a large amount of appendices and additional information in the latter part you do not need to read. This guide is structured to place the most important information first. Because of this, you can read the first part knowing that only the most crucial info has been placed there. Later parts sometimes circle back to cover concepts in more detail.

The beginner learner only needs to read up to First part conclusion to get a powerful jump-start to their learning. 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 Resources.

If you still feel this guide is too long, I advise you to think of it as an investment. If you start with a bit of theory, you will save time in the long run by doing it right 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.

Contents

Chapter 1

Before you start

1.1 How long will it take?

Languages are a lifetime pursuit and beginners often underestimate the amount of time it takes to learn a language. The first thing to note is there is no perfect level, even for your native language. There are only milestones that you set according to your goals. You first need to 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

A good idea of how many hours it takes to reach a reasonably competent level comes from the FSI Language Difficulty Ranking. For an easy language like Spanish or French, most people take around 1-2 years, but there is high variation caused by the second factor. If you studied 10 hours solidly per day, every day, you could potentially reach the same level in just over two months.

While time is the overwhelmingly important factor, it takes more than just time to learn a language. There are less and more efficient ways of learning. Here are the other factors that will determine your rate of learning:

- **How much of your study involves using the language?**—Almost all learning is best done with the language, meaning using real texts and audio and integrating speaking and writing into your study routine.

- **Are you working towards your goal?**—If you want to learn the language for a specific purpose, you should expect to get there faster by practising that aspect of the language much more than the average learner.

- **How well do you know what techniques are effective and what techniques work for you?**—Just reading this guide and following the few core principles covered here will get you 95% of the way. The rest comes with experience.

- **How much of your time with the language is spent actively paying attention?**— This means not just passively watching or listening, but actively focusing and trying to improve your ability or understanding. The more, the better.

- **Do you have a growth mindset?**—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. Everyone is capable of teaching themselves a language.

1.2   Set a goal

This guide assumes you have already chosen a language. If you haven't, read Appendix J Choosing a language.

In order 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. The foundations of a goal should already be there. If you're not sure what goal you should have, first think of the situations you want to use the language in. Your goals should be about your ability in these situations.

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 J 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. You might like to start off by thinking about a length of time you want to dedicate and then selecting a goal based on that time limit.

Here are a few hints:

- You can have multiple goals.

- You can also have smaller, short-term goals to help you measure progress.

- You can use constituent goals that you think are necessary to achieve your main goal (e.g. "know 2000 words"). Don't make such specific goals your primary goals, as they can distract you from focusing on what you truly want.

- It will help you to write down your goals somewhere.

- 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.

- You might be tempted not to worry about choosing a goal since you already know you want to speak the language and get better at it with no end in mind. Trust me—goals will help you get there faster.

Here are some example goals:

- Converse with my friend for 5 minutes without losing track of what she's talking about. Timeframe: 8 months.

- Read and understand Tolstoy without a dictionary. Timeframe: 5 years.

- Know enough basic words and grammar to feel comfortable communicating when I'm on holiday. Timeframe: 2 months.

1.3   Build a study schedule

Commit to a minimum amount of time to dedicate every day. People generally recommend approximately an hour per day, with an absolute minimum of 20 minutes. Beyond the need to sleep or complete any other essential responsibilities, there is no maximum to the amount of time you could spend. The more you can commit each day, the faster your progress will be. Every additional minute helps.

Make sure you also have a large enough block of time sometime in the week to get some focused study done. That might be an hour on the weekend, for example.

How much time you can spend during the day is going to be the primary indicator of how achievable your goal is. If you think you can't reach your desired goal given the time available, you need to either make time or adjust your goal's timing.

1.4   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", however this is somewhat of a misnomer (elaboration here).

This guide collects principles from around the web to save you the trial-and-error learning that a lot of us had 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, they will also apply to other aspects of your learning.

Chapter 2

How to approach your learning

We're going to start by looking at the four most useful principles. If you ignore all other principles, pay attention to these:

Principle: Use the language in order to learn it

The single most important principle is this: **you acquire your language when you use it in context**. Primarily this means reading and listening a lot. It takes a lot of time with the language to become fluent, and most of that time should be spent with natural input that is both **comprehensible** and **interesting** to **you**. That can mean reading texts, listening to podcasts, watching videos, writing stories, finding natives to speak with, or anything else that takes your fancy. In addition, speaking and writing are great ways of solidifying your knowledge and getting feedback. You will see this principle repeated throughout the guide.

This principle holds because learning a 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. It is the reason traditional methods of learning—memorising lists of words and grammar rules—is so ineffective. This kind of study will let you learn about a language, but it is a poor way to acquire it. You do not need to be able to complete grammar exercises to use a language correctly for the same reason you do not need to understand gyroscopic forces to ride a bike.

You can find a summary of the work of Stephen Krashen, who first popularised this idea, here and a great video demonstration here.

Principle: Work towards your goals

A large source of slow process for many learners is that they do not focus on doing things that are associated with their goals. This key concept is called "direct practice", and was perhaps best summarised by Scott Young in his book Ultralearning:

> "The easiest way to learn directly is to simply spend a lot of time doing the thing you want to become good at."

The individual skills improved by studying do not directly translate into your target situation without practice. For example, if you want to communicate, you need to spend a large amount of time practising communicating. Other exercises such as drilling grammar can help you work on key weaknesses, but are no substitute for essential direct practice.

> **Principle: Time with the language is the key to how fast you will learn**
>
> A lot of people come to r/languagelearning wanting to know how some people become so accomplished at languages, believing there must be some special technique they are utilising that makes languages come to them faster. Unfortunately, there is no magic bullet. A wide variety of techniques work. The overwhelmingly important factor is how much time you can spend with the language each day. Regardless of your technique, the more you practise, the more successful you will be.
>
> If 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?

> **Principle: Keep up your motivation**
>
> Motivation is required to spend the necessary hours and to learn to do it effectively, while becoming unmotivated can lead to stagnation as you find it difficult to sit and study for the required length of time. 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.
>
> Your motivation can easily wane over time, so it is important to pay attention to it and find ways to keep it strong. The best way to create motivation is to find ways to enjoy your language. Several principles in this guide are aligned with this goal. They are:
>
> - **Principle: Study in a way you enjoy**—Choose a method that you enjoy. This will take the edge off the study process.
>
> - **Principle: Use content you find interesting**—Don't stick with boring dialogues if you can't focus 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.
>
> - **Principle: Work towards your goals**—Striving towards your goals, making progress, and successfully engaging with those parts of the language can be a motivating experience. Be sure 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.

2.1   What you need to know

Languages consist of two core components: **grammar** and **vocabulary**.

1. **Grammar**—the structure of the language

2. **Vocabulary**—the more underrated of the core components

The language is expressed through any of the four skills:

1. **Reading**—This is the main source of input for most language learners. The main aspect is the language's script.

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. Understanding how letters correspond to sounds (orthography) is an important first step.

4. **Speaking**—In addition to being able to hear the sound system, the learner must learn to use these sounds. It also includes other aspects of pronunciation such as rhythm and intonation. Pronunciation is an important skill that is crucial for those who are learning to communicate.

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 1000-2000 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

Chapter 3

Resources

3.1   The four core resources

We need four core resources to start learning the basics:

1. A beginner course

2. A flashcard program

3. A dictionary

4. Input

First we will discuss where to find them and what they are, then we will look at how to best use them and how to study.

Finding resources

This guide provides examples that serve multiple languages. However, many great sources only deal with one language, so those listed by this guide are not representative of the high-quality resources that are out there.

Spend some time hunting for resources by reading guides and recommendations from other learners. Every time you encounter something you think you might like, bookmark it then keep looking. Once you've spent some time hunting, then go back and choose what you think will work for you, keeping in mind the insights from this guide.

There are several ways you can find good resources:

- Google search communities dedicated to your target language—see if they have a list of recommended resources.

- Google search for guides or articles about learning your target language.

- Check the resources section of the r/languagelearning wiki for your language. You can also often find resources in the subreddit dedicated to your target language.

Once you have found some good resources, you will need to choose which to use. Generally, you only need 1-2 courses, 1 flashcard program, 1 dictionary, and as much input as you can find. You don't have to stick with a resource if you decide you don't like it. There are three key factors you should take into account when you decide:

- How frequently it is recommended by other learners

- How much you think you will enjoy using it—keep in mind there is a lot of room for individual preference

- How well it aligns with the principles of learning

Next, we will look at some examples of resources you can use. Use the following sections to help you think about how you might prefer to learn.

Beginner course

A beginner course is any kind of course that tries to teach you the fundamentals in a structured manner. The essential component is grammar, however most will teach you much more.

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.

Generally you will pick one or two courses and use them throughout your beginner-level study. Remember: There is plenty of room for personal preference. Choose something that you think works for you.

There are six basic types of beginner courses you can use:

1. **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 too (highly popular)

3. **Online courses**—often website and/or apps with their own methodology (also very popular)

4. **Listen-and-repeat courses**—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 3.1: 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)
Teach-yourself books	Colloquial series
Online courses	Duolingo (Free) LingVist (paid) Busuu (paid) Glossika (paid) Babbel (paid)
Listen-and-repeat courses	Language Transfer (free) Coffee Break Languages (free) Pimsleur (paid)

Table 3.2: 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. Remembering what is taught is usually left to the learner. Videos and podcasts can be slower.
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, remember and use lots of useful words and constructions	Not well-rounded. Use as a supplement only.
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.

The benefits of 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 in a low-pressure environment—an important aspect often missing in traditional courses.

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

The benefits of using tutors

Tutors are one of the best supplementary resources as they can structure learning to your preference.

Tutors are expensive, so 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. Remember: learning is a fundamentally internal process—you still need to put in hard work regardless of the source.

Using tutors as a source of input and to identify errors and provide correction is generally a much more productive use of your money.

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, and 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 practice and identify errors.

Flashcards

Flashcards are the perfect tool for learning new words and helping you remember grammatical constructions. You should endeavour to use at least some kind of flashcard system. Pick the one you like most and will likely stick with.

Anki

The most popular flashcard software is Anki. Anki is popular due to its 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 is already a large number of 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.

I recommend you eventually learn to make your own cards. This allows you to add words that you find personally relevant and useful.

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 below.

If you prefer something simpler, there are lots of alternatives. The table of flashcard software below lists a few.

Table 3.3: 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

Dictionary

It is important to find and use a good dictionary to supplement your reading. Dictionaries can be online or physical, but most people find online dictionaries to be much more convenient.

How to choose a dictionary

The best dictionary to use depends on your language. There are some excellent dictionaries dedicated entirely to a single language. 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 3.4: Popular online dictionaries

Dictionary	Description
Wiktionary	A poplar 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
Linguee	Clean interface. Example sentences tend to be complex
WordReference	Standard dictionary

There is also translation software, which can help you get the sense of the meaning of an entire sentence. Avoid becoming over-reliant on translating whole sentences. Make sure you attempt to understand a sentence yourself first. Avoid using translators for single words, since you may be given an inaccurate translation.

Table 3.5: Popular translation software

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

Popular tools

Table 3.6: Popular tools

Tool	Description
Keyword lookup	Chrome tip to help you search dictionaries faster using the search bar
ImTranslator	Dictionary lookup addon

Phrasebooks

You may also like to learn some phrases, either to help you get a feel for the language or if you are travelling soon. The primary issue with phrasebooks is that generally the reader doesn't remember the phrases they read. Learning needs to be supplemented with flashcards.

The best phrasebooks are likely specific to your language. Here are some websites that have phrases and words in lots of languages that teach you in an interactive fashion:

Table 3.7: Online phrasebooks

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

Input

Input is the final key to language acquisition. Remember the principle Use the language in order to learn it. Using more input is the single biggest positive difference you can make to improve your language learning. Good input is any text, podcast, video, or whatever that is both **comprehensible** and **interesting** to **you**.

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.

How to choose input

As a beginner, the best content for you will probably be intended for beginner-level language learners. As always, try to find recommendations from other learners.

Finding content as a beginner can be difficult, particularly for languages that are not as popular. I recommend you simply use the best, most interesting content you can find that allows you to practise reading and/or listening without being overwhelmed by the difficulty.

Here are some examples of input you might use:

Table 3.8: 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

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

TV series, music, movies, and real news websites are generally intended for adult native speakers, and hence probably too difficult to use effectively. I do not recommend beginners use them regularly. If you're truly starved for interesting content and want to try them, feel free to give them a go. At the end of the day, your learning is self-directed, and you should engage with what you enjoy.

The best content for a beginner generally sits at the sweet spot between comprehensibility and adult-interest. 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

Popular sources of input

Table 3.9: Popular sources of input

Source	Description
r/languagelearning media section	Subreddit list of good media resources
Easy Languages YouTube channel	Street interviews with dual-language subtitles—quality beginner content in lots of languages
WordLab Youtube catalogue	Massive catalogue of learner-appropriate channels in lots of common languages
Gloss	Website with a lot of beginner content

Popular tools

There is a variety of useful tools to help you improve your learning with input:

Table 3.10: 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

Principle: Mix it up

Try to use a variety of different resources. A large mix of resources is even better than a single type. 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 after you've done a lot of listening practice.

Keep an open mind and try different things every now and then. If you feel your progress slowing with a resource or method, try something else.

Chapter 4

How to learn your language

4.1 Language learning routine

Remember: Your goal is to learn the basic grammar such as verb and noun forms, the general structure and logic, approximately 1000-2000 words, and enough of the key skills to function in whatever context you are learning for. By now you should have 1-2 beginner courses, a flashcard program, a dictionary, and lots of beginner-level input you can use to do this.

- **Beginner courses** give you the grammar and other basics through direct explanation, and will often provide drills and content.

- **Flashcards** supplement lessons and content by allowing you to drill grammar and vocabulary as necessary.

- **Dictionaries** supplement your reading.

- **Input** lets you learn the language as it is used in the real world.

To learn a language as a beginner, you simply need to progress through your chosen course while ensuring you spend most of your time supplementing that material with content and vocabulary flashcard practice.

How to use your time

As noted in the section Build a study schedule, you should have a dedicated slot of time each day set aside to study your language. This should be at a minimum 20 minutes, and can be as much as you want. There is no maximum.

There is no hard and fast rule for how you should split your time. As a rule of thumb, dedicating around one third of your study time on grammar, one third on vocabulary, and a third on the four skills should work well. This study time can be spent reading explanations, doing drills, or learning using content. For those that hate grammar, you can safely reduce your time studying grammar to about 1/8th. I don't recommend going completely without grammar, however there are learners that do this.

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 and what content is available that is interesting and at your level. Aim for at least 50% of your time to be spent using content.

> **Key tip: Find ways to learn on the go**
>
> In addition, the advantages of cellphones and books is you can 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.
>
> 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 any spare moment you have to practise them—on the bus, in a queue, walking between class, etc.
>
> - Use a beginner course that has a cellphone app.
>
> - Listen to podcasts while walking or driving, or during any other time you'd otherwise not have to carefully focus. The largest benefit of podcasts is that you can use them even when doing other tasks, such as cooking or cleaning.
>
> - Carry a book with you.

4.2   The four mediums of learning

There are four mediums that enable you to learn some aspect of your language. They 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. These are also often called "exercises" by language textbooks.

- **Encountering in your content**—By encountering forms and words in context, you eventually come to understand how they are used.

- **Language output**—Speaking and writing your language will reinforce your knowledge and help you get feedback.

In learning your language you should naturally move down the four mediums and come to apprehend most grammar and vocabulary you need.

The most important medium is **Encountering in your content**. Remember the principle Use the language in order to learn it? While direct explanation can be very useful, learning only happens once you use the language. The main way you learn grammar and vocabulary is by being prompted to remember or otherwise extract meaning from the language. This is why using comprehensible input is key.

> **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.
>
> Don't be discouraged when you encounter unknown words and forms or forget things you thought you knew—it's a natural part of language learning. You will require a lot of repetition before something truly sticks in your mind.
>
> 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.

Next we will cover how to approach grammar and vocabulary, then we will look at how best to use the four resources.

4.3 Grammar

Most of your initial grammar learning comes from your beginner course, helping you understand the core verb/noun forms and the general structure and logic. From there you can refine and improve your knowledge using large amounts of input. Learners also drill grammar using flashcard sentences.

> **Key tip: Do not rely on learning grammar rules**
>
> In general, learning rules is a poor way to acquire a language. Remember the principle Use the language in order to learn it? While rules are useful to know, 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. While it is ideal to use direct explanation only once before you use content, it is completely acceptable to go back to the explanation to help you if you can't remember.

> **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.

4.4 Vocabulary

A huge portion of speaking a language is really just knowing enough words. Start off by learning the 1000 most common words as fast as possible. Stretch for 2000 if you can. That lets you understand a lot of basic language.

Most of your word acquisition will be through flashcards, with much introduced to you through your beginner course and still more introduced to you through your input. Later, many learners move away from flashcards into large amounts of reading, while others continue to use flashcards heavily.

Key tip: Learn the most common words first

Words in natural language follow something called Zipf's Law, which states 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 2000-3000 words, you have covered almost all of the words you will hear in daily conversation. With only a few hundred words, you will have access to all of the filler words, which make up most of spoken language. This isn't a free shortcut however, because much of the meaning is contained in the less common words. What it will do is put you in a good position to learn these words naturally and better derive meaning from context.

Principle: Words, words, words

Learning more words is generally a better way of boosting your comprehension than actively studying grammar, since grammar can more easily be understood through context. 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, so if you don't know what to actively study, try to do that. While 10,000 is a large number, you will get there eventually by chipping away at it every day.

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. This is the principle Difficulty + successful recall.

4.5   How to use your beginner course

Exactly how you use your beginner course depends on what you have chosen, so there's not much specific advice I can give you. Instead I will remind you to remember the principle Use the language in order to learn it. Lessons will give you an explicit understanding of something that makes you feel like you know it, but you will not be able to use it until you practise. Understanding the grammar is very different from using it correctly.

The general pattern is to use a beginner course for its explanations and drills, then using input to solidify that knowledge. If your beginner course already relies on using lots of input, be it through phrases, dialogues, or anything, that is ideal.

Don't try to memorise your lesson content. Languages must be acquired, not memorised. Memorisation will make you very good at explaining the language, but very poor at using it.

> **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 to learn the next unit, so don't spend too much time trying to completely learn a concept or word perfectly before you move on. The very act of moving forward with a loose understanding will help teach you things already covered as you encounter them again.

> **Principle: Study in a way you enjoy**
>
> Keeping your motivation up is an important principle, but when it comes to garden-variety desk study, studying languages is not always the most exciting activity. For that reason, choosing a course and study 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. There is nothing wrong with you, it is just that **the overwhelming factor seems to be the interest and enjoyment of the learner themselves**. If you find the method you are using is too boring, change it up.

When to stop using your beginner course

Your beginner course should eventually start running out of "easy wins" with the grammar. These are very common aspects like verb conjugations and noun declensions, articles and prepositions. The more similar the language is to your native, the less time you will need to spend learning grammar. 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. Once this core grammar is covered, you can cease to study grammar in a systematic manner.

After that point it is still recommended to continue to use your course or some other book or website as a reference of forms to take note of when you are using content. The advantage of continuing with grammar in a structured manner is that you will have a wider knowledge base that will let you recognise forms you might miss otherwise. If you have a strong dislike of grammar, you can get away with using it minimally.

4.6   How to use flashcards

Flashcards are essentially how we "cheat" our way into repeatedly encountering new words more often than normally occurs in our study.

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.

There are three ways information can be shown on flashcards:

1. Single words

2. Phrases

3. Word plus an example phrase

I recommend learning the word plus an example phrase. 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.

In addition, people choose to review cards in three general ways:

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, however productive learning should be strongly preferred over receptive learning. Recalling words and sentences for productive purposes is both harder and more powerful for 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.

> **Key tip: 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 far 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. Trying to do more actually makes your learning slower. Learning a sentence

chock full of new grammatical constructions and words might seem like a really efficient way of learning, but it will actually slow your learning down. The purpose of sentences is to provide helpful context and 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. At the start your sentences will need to be as basic as possible, such as "where is the toilet?" or "how are you?".

4.7   How to use dictionaries

Use dictionaries when you encounter **key unknown words** that you want to know. Never simply look up new words as you encounter them. Try to understand or at least cover the whole section or text first, then go back for the words crucial to your understanding.

When reading texts, take note of unknown words that are both simpler and more common. Avoid focusing on uncommon words when there are many more common ones left for you to learn first. A large portion of the new words you encounter will only appear once, meaning there will not be repeated opportunities to help learn them. Learning these words is harder for a beginner because they are generally reading slowly and selectively.

Key tip: Don't blindly trust single-word translations

Most learning involves getting translations that translate a word from your target language to English. It is important to remember that translations are imperfect. Languages use words differently, and the kind of contexts words are used in often do not overlap. 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.

Key tip: Don't use dictionaries to learn words on their own

Dictionaries are a supplement, a reference to be used when you discover a particularly interesting word or something you are struggling with. Using them to select which words to learn can cause you to learn less common words without being aware of their proper usage.

4.8   How to use input

As already noted, input essential to learning a language. The reason for this is twofold:

1. Languages are far too complex to be adequately described by any book or course. In order to be introduced to all the different ways and specific contexts words and forms can be used together, you need to first see the language used in context.

2. Explanations and drills help you learn about the language, but using the language is a skill you must practice and refine.

For this reason you should aim to use as much input as possible. Input does three things:

1. It introduces you to new forms and words in context in a way that is interesting

2. It solidifies words and forms in your memory as you encounter them repeatedly

3. It builds your intuition for the language

Intuition is an important part of learning. It is the subconscious knowledge that makes you so good at your native language. This is why certain things can just sound correct or incorrect without you having any explicit understanding of why.

Using input is simple. Simply engage with it in whatever manner you prefer and try to understand as much as possible. 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.

> **Principle: Balance active and passive learning**
>
> Remember the principle Active recall. Active learning is the act of actively engaging with your resources that enables you to efficiently apprehend new knowledge. Passive learning is the act of letting the language come to you by engaging with as much as possible without focused study.
>
> Active learning is the more efficient way of engaging with your content and will let you gain new knowledge faster when you use it for focused study. At the same time, learning a language takes enormous amounts of input and there is no way to realistically expose yourself to all of 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.

> **Principle: Noticing**
>
> One powerful learning tool is 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. 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 you have an idea of how they are used.

Principle: Use content you find interesting

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, movies, browsing forums, or even gaming. You can use this media for a focused study session or you can just enjoy it. If your level is not yet high enough, it may be quite a steep learning curve, but that should hopefully give you the motivation to study even more.

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

Principle: Your level +1

The ideal content is just a little bit challenging. Learning occurs when the brain struggles a bit before making a successful connection. The best way to ensure this happens is to choose content that is your level +1. +1 means that the content is just a bit harder than you are comfortable with. 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. This is the principle Difficulty + successful recall.

What precisely +1 means may depend on what you are aiming to study. As a general rule, 90-98% of words should already be familiar to you. For listening, a clip 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.

Principle: 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 review, where you allow content 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. As much as possible your learning should require active use of your memory to recall concepts and words you have already been exposed to.

4.9   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. You do not need to reach the very end of your course if you don't want to. At this point, learning becomes more self-directed based on your goals, and it will be useful to read the chapters below.

4.10   First part summary

Here are the four key principles 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.

4.11   First part conclusion

This concludes the first part of the guide. If you're eager to start, you can stop here and start studying. Ultimately, perfect technique is second to just spending time with the language. If you do stop here, good luck!

If you have an interest in doing so, you are free to read on and see how your language learning might change as you start to get more comfortable in your language, as well as get some more tips for your studying.

Next up, we will discuss the two big intermediate activities, then we will look at the intermediate stage in more detail.

Chapter 5

The two big intermediate activities

There are two activities that are so important to successful language learning that they deserve their own chapter. If you do nothing else, you can still be a successful intermediate learner simply by doing two things: 1, conversation practice, and 2, extensive reading.

5.1   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.

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, however the beginner vocabulary is so limited as to make it impossible without a tutor or highly accommodating language partner. In addition, it does not necessarily help the learner learn new words or understand how to use them correctly. 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 start earlier or only try out speaking 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 practising in each other's language. You can do this by organising with people in your real life if you have any. If you are like the majority of us and do not have willing native speakers 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 iTalki 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 enough 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 in order to get conversation practice, either online or in real life if available.

Beating nerves

Starting to speak can be daunting, particularly at first. If you are feeling nervous or anxious about starting to speak, understand that most people will be very kind and 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 it without the pressure to perform for someone else. The initial hurdle of starting to speak is the largest, especially in your first foreign language, but there is no way around it. After that, speaking becomes increasingly easier, even when first speaking any future languages you may learn.

Principle: 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 of 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 Why do adult language learners make mistakes?.

Principle: Get feedback on your language 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 natives to be corrected.

Pronunciation

It is useful to deliberately learn good pronunciation as it typically does not come naturally to adult learners. Pronunciation is especially important for languages with very different phonology, such as Chinese. Poor pronunciation learned during the early stages can become ingrained and hard to fix, so learning as you start speaking is preferable.

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.

Learning how languages vocalise is a reasonably sizeable topic. This section is a quick-start to help you get most of the way there. 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 to make them.

First, take note of elements of your target language that are different from your native language. Here are some things that will be different:

- Sounds—also known as phonology

- Tones (if your language has them)

- Intonation—tone throughout the whole sentence

- Rhythm

Spend focused effort improving each of these aspects. Dedicate some time to doing some activities in which you practise speaking some words alone in front of your computer. 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.

5.2   Extensive reading

Reading is probably the best way to continue to improve your understanding of vocabulary and grammar. Vocabulary size is strongly correlated with time spent reading (source). 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. If you only read you won't improve your ability to distinguish sounds in speech, but you can work on that separately if necessary.

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. *Harry Potter* is one of the most re-read books by learners.

Chapter 6

Intermediate Stages

6.1 Intermediate study

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

- There is less structured learning of grammar.

- 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.

- 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.

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. Writing and speaking will also start to feature much more prominently in your study.

6.2 Intermediate study routine

It is useful to divide your time into study blocks. Study blocks generally last between 20 minutes and 1 hour and will usually deal with a single resource, such as an article, a chapter in a book, a podcast, or a video. A single study block will have a goal or goals involving the improvement of some of the 4 skills, vocabulary, grammar, or a combination of these.

> **Principle: Make language learning a 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 you 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, the default should be that time is dedicated to study, and avoiding that requires finding a specific and good reason not to.

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.

Principle: Incorporate your learning into your life

It's helpful to think of learning language as a process, as something you need to incorporate as a part of your life rather than something to set time for like a school subject. Understand that, and you can let it become a small part of you and how you think and structure your life. One way to do this is switching the media you consume to your target language. You could also try to find a friend group that speaks your target language. A minor intervention you can make is switching the languages of the devices you use.

Principle: Cultivate 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 sit at your desk and study. 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.

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.

What should I study?

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

1. Your goals

2. Your weaknesses

Your goals

Remember the principle Work towards your goals. This means you should be regularly attempting your goal to improve at it. The best activities for study either closely simulate or completely 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, reading can be considered a good simulation for the purposes of learning new forms or vocabulary, but you want to be focusing on listening and speaking activities.

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?

Here is a list of things you can aim to improve. This list is not comprehensive and what is most important will depend on your target language. Use this to help you think about your weaknesses.

Table 6.1: 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

6.3   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 being read or heard. It will be helpful to become comfortable with some ambiguity regarding what you just read or heard.

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, phonetics, 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 one the four skills. If you use content, you would 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.

Here are some activities for you to consider doing:

Meaning-focused activities

Table 6.2: 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 natives 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.

Language-focused activities

Table 6.3: 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.

Fluency-focused activities

Table 6.4: 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.

6.4   How learning happens

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. These are the language- and fluency-focused activities. Drill is about learning those parts you need to improve without worrying as much about how they go together.

Practice is everything else. It is using the language in an integrated fashion. These are the meaning-focused activities. Practice should be about blending and honing the skills and knowledge you already have with less focus on gaining new knowledge.

Drilling

Drilling is an effective way to fix weaknesses and improve at a faster rate. You can drill grammar or vocabulary when you encounter unfamiliar forms or words in your input or you can drill specific skills. Here are some common drills learners use:

- **Writing things down in a workbook**—many learners find the act of writing to be helpful for memorisation

- **Looking up words and concepts**

- **Exercises**—These can take a variety of forms

- **Flashcards**

- **Studying word lists**

- **Practising speaking aloud and other fluency-focused activities**

A good drill exercise:

- emulates the real language as much as possible, using real language examples with natural sentences for context

- 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 that do not prevent you from understanding your content

It is also recommended to avoid over-doing drills. A lot of the skills learners choose to drill will be developed over time with input anyway. This is why workbook grammar exercises are not a recommended drill. Instead, use input and practice as much as you can. Drill when you have identified a specific weakness important to your goals. The most common drill activity is ordinary vocabulary flashcard study.

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 will be goal-oriented. You may:

- not be able to practise your goal

- not have the energy or motivation for focused study

- 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.**

> **Principle: Practice your language then drill your weaknesses**
>
> 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.
>
> For more information, go to Elaboration: Practice your language then drill your weaknesses.

Language-focused learning with content

Since language-focused learning is going to be one of your most effective exercises, it will be helpful to look at how to do it with your 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 method 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, try to understand how sounds create words and how words flow together in practice

- Drill some key vocabulary with flashcards

- Listen to the text once you are more familiar with if it was too difficult to comprehend via audio earlier on

- 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

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.

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.

Principle: 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 struggle**—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.

Learning functions by the learner successfully recalling and applying words or concepts. Words or grammar will only become solidified once you use your new knowledge to extract meaning from your content and use the language yourself. Your brain will learn optimally when you encounter something difficult, work hard, and eventually succeed. This means there needs to be some kind of **mental struggle** involved in your learning.

To ensure your mental struggle 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, make sure you encounter new words or forms quickly enough after you first learn them in isolation. If too much time passes, you'll spend mental effort trying to recall something that is gone.

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.

6.5   Some things to watch out for

Language learning plateaus

People inevitably encounter certain plateaus during their learning, when their progress seems to slow to a snail's pace. It happens to everyone. This 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, trying to improve, and, most importantly, **trust the process**. You will progress, I promise. Read the r/languagelearning FAQ entry here for more info.

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 becomes stuck in the learner's speech. This is different from ordinary mistakes that a learner makes, which can be corrected and will often fix themselves. Fossilised errors are often resistant to correction and the learners efforts to change. These 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, to the point of hearing and using it so often it sounds natural and comes to mind easily. There are two general techniques for avoiding fossilised errors:

1. Try to be constantly aware of how words and forms are used around you. Focus on shifting your speech to more closely resemble how natives speak.

2. Ensure you have a source of feedback or correction. This can be 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.

6.6   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

- Remember the principle Difficulty + successful recall—there needs to be some mental struggle for effective learning to happen

6.7   Conclusions

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.

Below 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!

How to learn pronunciation

Languages function in terms of 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.

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. Think about how this sentence sounds different in your mind. when. I. type. the. last. part. like. this.

Intonation: Languages use pitch differently to mark questions, statements, and convey other information.

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 stressed 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.

These 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. If you're lucky, you
can find a guide somewhere that takes you through all the sounds and precisely how they are
pronounced. It may take some time to train your ear. For a while, different sounds will seem
the same to you. If you persevere, however, they will begin to sound different. Eventually, you
will wonder how they ever sounded alike.

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.

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 more closely resemble that of native speakers you hear.

The key is to identify the aspects that will be difficult for you based on differences between your native and target language. It can be helpful to search for pronunciation guides online.

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 with a text reference and try to speak over them in exactly the same way.
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.

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 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. Sometimes Wiktionary has them.

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 find yourself studying on the move a lot but don't have the time to sit at a desk and build your own deck.

B.2 Further advice on using content

Principle: 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, or perhaps the scene is shot in an apple orchard and you hear the word often. 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.

Principle: Approach your language with 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.

Appendix C

Further advice on learning language

C.1 Further advice on learning grammar

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 stages. 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.

C.2 Further advice on learning vocabulary

Other than by flashcards and dictionary lookups, the way you learn words is by encountering them naturally and deriving meaning through context and repetition, as you have done with your native language. This takes a lot of input and can sometimes be imperceptible, but is highly effective. Any advanced learner will tell you a large portion of the words they know came to them this way.

Mnemonics

Mnemonics are a general tool that turn vocabulary into easy-to-recall mental images that serve to help you remember a word. Mnemonics can be very useful as a way to learn vocabulary quickly, however the word won't be truly learned until you don't actually 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", which is "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, imagine 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

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 are phrases such as "of course", "at all", "for instance". Think of these as separate bits of vocabulary to be learned together, in which constituent words are simply 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.

Focus on words that don't directly translate

Most words in the 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 a single 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*.

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*. It has 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.

Associations to similar words you already know can help you remember words' meanings. 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*. Some root words have derivations that may not be immediately obvious. For example, you probably didn't notice that the root *-spir-*

is the link between the words *inspire*, *respire*, and *spirit*. As you can see, the associations you use to help you remember might be more abstract.

Take advantage of these connections by trying to spot them where possible. They will aid your learning by drawing on logical connections between linked concepts. 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* are related, and the similarities are clearly visible.

Principle: The brain learns in chunks

Which ordering of letters do you think is easier to memorise: *"ohezro esn rinyg bivt"*, 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 already familiar with the constituent words. You don't need to memorise the letters because you've already memorised the correct order for 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 structured into words. Grammar will be more easy 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.

> **Principle: 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.

C.3   Learning through content

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 first to a 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 are trying to practise listening, there needs to be a mental struggle followed by successful apprehension.

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 having to use 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 D

Common Questions

D.1 What's wrong with learning two languages at once?

There is nothing inherently wrong and you can learn two languages without mixing them up. Generally it is advised to actively learn one language at a time. This is because learning another takes time away from the first. If you want to actively learn more than one language, be sure you have the time to dedicate to both. 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.

D.2 Can you 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. Also keep in mind that by the time they are an adult, the child will have spent an enormous amount of time in school practicing improving their language skills and having their output critiqued. This video by Tom Scott provides a great overview. Adult language learners can theoretically improve on this performance by spending time in focused study to find and improve weaknesses and learn words and complex forms faster. It is clear that massive amounts of input are essential for achieving high proficiency regardless of how you study, however active study can aid adult learners and let them learn faster than a child.

D.3 Why do adult language learners make mistakes?

There is an important distinction between mistakes and errors. Mistakes are accidental, and the learner knows they are wrong. Errors are made due to a learner's lack of knowledge. Mistakes are a natural part of learning and disappear over time with practice—you should not be too concerned by them. Errors are more difficult to fix. Errors can also fossilise through repeated use, a common problem for highly advanced learners.

   Mistakes and errors are an inevitable part of learning and you have to make them in order to improve. You should never avoid speaking for fear of making them.

   There are two general ways an adult learner comes to make regular **errors** in their speech:

1. Their native language interferes with the process of using the target language

2. The learner misuses a rule or word based on a lack of experience

The language learning community has a special interest in children and their ability to learn a language perfectly. Why do children seem to have such an easy time producing perfect speech where adults struggle? Unlike adults, children do not generally make the first type of error, even when they are learning multiple languages. The second type is made by both groups, though with children arguably less frequently. Why does this happen?

In terms of time spent with input before attempting output, children are markedly more conservative than adult speakers. That is to say, they wait a long time before they try speaking. Adult speakers frequently learn rules and then quickly move to applying them by speaking. While this is useful for communication, the rules of vocabulary and grammar usage acquired by an adult do not exactly resemble native speech. Languages are far more complex than any dictionary or grammar book could effectively describe. The result is that most of the adult's first attempts at communication will not resemble native speech. To fully acquire languages, enormous amounts of input are necessary, and it is only with input that adults eventually come to speak more accurately. Children are given far more comprehensible input than adults and, without the grammar book or dictionary, are generally much slower at acquiring basic forms. Once they do acquire these forms, however, there is no example for them to follow except that of perfect native speech. Children do not acquire the same forms in the same manner as the adult learner and these differences lead adult learners to produce speech that is not native-like.

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. Here are some helpful hints:

- **Pay attention to how the language is used in your input**—Remember that the language you learn through rules and instruction will not perfectly resemble the language as it is spoken by natives. Instruction should serve to point words and forms out to you, which you then come to know through repeated input. All other learning should involve attempting to absorb natural forms in context, through flashcards, videos, stories, or even grammar translation. As much as possible, base your output on input you have heard or read, not what was instructed to you.

- **Ensure you have a source of feedback and correction**—Since you are more liable to make errors due to your first language interfering, feedback and correction are highly useful.

- **Formal study can help adults learn faster**—While it is true that children learn their native language perfectly without as much formal study, adults do not have as much free time with input. You can learn faster with some help. Because it is nearly impossible to avoid your native language interfering with your target language, being made aware of how to speak correctly can help you avoid interference.

- **Practice pronunciation**—There is evidence to suggest children have some inherent advantages learning phonology at very young ages. If you want to sound like a native, you will need to put in focused effort.

You can read the article Mistakes and errors in the r/languagelearning concepts wiki for more information.

D.4   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.

This happens because language learning progress becomes exponentially slower the more advanced you get. The early stages up until a good conversational level are relatively fast to master. From there the path to fluency is a slow crawl by comparison. There's no cut-off point where learning suddenly slows down, however there are some key milestones.

Once the learner has the basics of phonology and grammar down and knows around 2000 words, they can usually muddle through a conversation with an accommodating native speaker. From there, a bit of practice conversing to build up more comfort and familiarity with the language's sounds and structure and you can call yourself conversational. Beyond this point is an ocean of harder words, nuance, idioms, unintuitive grammatical constructs, rapid speech, and many more skills that can only be improved incrementally. Each new word or idiom is only a tiny fraction of the number known by a native speaker, so the time needed to make a similar leap in your apparent skill level appears to grow exponentially.

While you might not need all these forms, idioms, and words to get by, they are part of what comprises fluency.

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.

Common Mistakes

E.1 Learning languages like you did in school

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

1. **They focus far too much on grammar and rote learning**—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.

2. **They are not timed well**—Learning languages takes a lot of time and practice, and 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.

3. **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.

4. **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.

Elaboration

F.1 Elaboration: Practice your language then drill your weaknesses

Recall earlier we discussed the need to focus on activities closely associated with your goal, such as practising speaking when your goal involves spoken communication. We already covered **drill**, the act of deliberately practising your weaknesses, and **direct practice**, the act of practising the thing you want to be good at as directly as possible.

What drills are best?

Drilling reduces your cognitive load and lets you focus improving on a single thing or subset of the full task. You've probably noticed you've already drilled a lot in your beginner course. We're not teaching you a new skill, just labelling something you already do.

Drill doesn't have to be simple rote-learning activities. In fact, some drills are far superior than others. Ones that more closely simulate the skills you are looking to improve are best. This is why completing grammar drills that test you on choosing the correct form can be so poor. 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 more closely simulate what you will encounter in your real life. That is another reason why grammar should be learned in context. Engaging with grammar in texts far more closely simulates the goals of 99.9% of learners.

With this in mind I have one more concept for you:

Transfer

Transfer is simply the concept describing how knowledge and skill at one task applies to novel situations and related tasks. For us language learners, that means how our study of the components of a language translate into the ability to speak or do whatever our goal is. Research demonstrates that transfer is surprisingly difficult, and does not happen automatically. Tests of economic reasoning comparing college economics majors to other students showed a surprising lack of a difference between the two groups (source). The same can happen to you if you spend your time learning tables of conjugations and memorising particles.

How do we apply this?

We cannot rely on practising some component of a language and hoping we'll be able do some related task when the time comes. This knowledge will not easily turn into skills you can apply to achieve your goals without deliberate practice. For example, getting good at reading won't translate into fluid conversation without practice talking.

The reason these distinctions are useful to note is because 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. All of these tasks have their place and are important, but 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. Achieving your goals with the language is going to require both practising doing things that get you closer to your goals and studying specific aspects of the language that will help you get better at your goal faster.

How much of each?

Both 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, and 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 (hard to fix) errors (most often occurs if you are speaking a lot) or cause your rate of improvement to stagnate.

Direct practice helps you learn and refine the necessary skills while helping you identify specific weaknesses that are holding back your performance. Take these weaknesses and find ways to drill them.

Why should I read if my goal is conversation?

In this guide we 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. That is a drill exercise. In addition, the written form is a good simulation of the spoken language, containing most of the same grammar and vocabulary. We can't always engage directly with our goal—perhaps there are no speakers around—so it can be helpful to use a substitute.

F.2   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

Full list of principles

G.1   Principles of approach

- Work towards your goals—do whatever it is you are learning the language for

- Use content you find interesting—find content you like

- Don't be afraid to make mistakes—mistakes are inevitable, don't let them stop you trying

- Time with the language is the key to how fast you will learn—the more you practice, the faster you will improve

- Keep up your motivation—find ways to stay interested in the language

- Don't try to learn things perfectly first time—you need to see the language in context a lot first

- Make language learning a habit—do a bit every day.

- Cultivate discipline—sometimes you have to force yourself to study

- 80 percent of your results come from 20 percent of your study—find the most effective activities and biggest weaknesses and focus on them

- Incorporate your learning into your life—find ways to fit in study throughout your day

- Approach your language with curiosity—a curious mindset helps learning

G.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

- Difficulty + successful recall—learning happens after there is a mental struggle to recall a word or concept

- Practice your language then drill your weaknesses—find weaknesses in your language skill then isolate them with drills

- Repetition helps you learn—you need to encounter something a lot before you learn it

- The brain learns in chunks—you can't learn too much at once; focus on the easier, more basic skills then build up

- Learning with your subconscious—learning is largely unconscious; find ways to let your unconscious mind do the work

- Noticing—Noticing forms in your content is a powerful way to learn

- Active recall—Use your memory actively to recall words and forms

- Balance active and passive learning—Spend time both actively engaging with your content and passively enjoying it

- Top-down and bottom-up processing—use both broader context and your language knowledge to help you understand

G.3   Principles of practice

- Mix it up—a variety of resources is useful for learning all the skills you need

- Words, words, words—increase your vocabulary as much as possible

- Get feedback on your language ability—feedback helps you catch errors

- Your level +1—use content just a bit above your level

About languages

This section provides links and information on understanding how languages work. Understanding languages is a useful skill because it will allow you to recognise patterns and break down the various elements of the language you are learning to understand how meaning is constructed. As you are learning, noticing these aspects will help you build your skills faster.

This playlist is one of the best out there, and much of the below points will link to videos in this playlist. It is made for people who make conlangs (constructed languages), however the information is the same.

H.1   Grammar

There is an enormous amount of information on different grammatical concepts, so covering them all is impossible. Here are a few for you:

- Verbal tense—there's a lot more to it than you think

- Noun case systems—these are very common around the world

- Verb mood—video 1, video 2

- Verb aspect

- Ergativity

- Language typology: isolating, agglutinative, fusional, polysynthetic

Appendix I

Recommended reading

Here you can find links to all the useful sources used to inform 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

I.1 Podcasts

- The Actual Fluency Podcast

- I Will Teach you a Language

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 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. Any country that trades needs people fluent in both English and its national language. There will always be some kind of employment available to you if you are willing to move.

- **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 amount of hours with the language it might take to reach a certain level. This is because languages you are bored by will be personally 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 of course 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 which 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.

J.1   Motivation

One of the biggest factors that determine your success is if you stick with the language you choose. You will not persist with 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 big and 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. There may be some factor you consciously consider important, but if it doesn't make you motivated, you need to consider if it is truly important to you. It may be that your priorities are not truly your own, but are instead dictated by those around you.

> **Key tip: Spend some time trying them out**
>
> If you're still undecided, we 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. Basically 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.