

HOW TO

TEACH YOURSELF

A FOREIGN

LANGUAGE

Principles, resources and ideas
to use when learning

S. A. J. FORBES

How to Teach Yourself a Foreign Language

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How to Teach Yourself a Foreign Language

S. A. J. Forbes



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Introduction

Welcome to *How to Teach Yourself a Foreign Language*. The purpose of this guide is to prepare you with the skills and knowledge you need to learn any foreign language as effectively and quickly as possible. It is designed to support you from the absolute beginner stages through to an upper-intermediate level. What's more, it's completely free! If that sounds useful to you, read on!

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

How this guide works

This guide does not contain the perfect technique to learn a language (such a thing doesn't exist), nor will it talk about what I do personally. Instead, I take the best of what the world has to offer about language learning and give it to you in a form that is practicable, insightful, and easy to understand. I will do this by guiding you through the key topics of learning your language. These include:

- The resources you need
- Where to find resources
- How to use your resources optimally
- What activities to do
- How to learn more effectively and efficiently

This guide focuses on placing the most important information at the start while leaving the extra info for later. This means you don't need to read the full guide before you begin learning. If you've never learned a language to fluency before, I recommend you read at least until the end of [Building a Method](#), but you can begin your journey once you've read [Resources](#)

As for the rest, though it might seem like a lot of info, I advise you to think of it as an investment. If you start with a bit of theory now, you will save time in the long run by doing it better the first time.

Principles

Principles are the basic underlying rules and ideas that enable you to be an effective language learner. If there is something I want to highlight as a principle, you will find it in a blue box as seen below. I advise you to pay attention to them.¹



Principle: Example

This is an example principle.

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

¹Many principles you will sometimes hear called "language hacks" elsewhere online, though this is somewhat of a misnomer. Elaboration can be found in the section [Why is the term "language hacks" a misnomer?](#)

About me

In case you were wondering about me, I'm a language learning hobbyist who moderates the r/languagelearning community on Reddit. This guide does not stand on the basis of my achievements, but is created by me combining (to the best of my ability) all the advice commonly given out by successful language learners. I have spent a lot of time learning languages, learning how to learn them, and searching the web for answers to common questions. Over that time, I've gained a lot of insight into what a beginner needs to start. That's what I'm aiming to share with you here.

Support

This guide has taken many hundreds of hours of research and writing to create. If you would like to say thank you, I appreciate any and all emails sent my way. You can also [buy me a coffee](#) if you'd like to thank me in a slightly more tangible way.

If you prefer an online format, you can [find the guide on my website](#).

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

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Chapter 1

Before you start

This chapter outlines your journey ahead, starting with building a goal and then moving to how you progress.

1.1 How long will it take?

The first thing to note is this: there is no perfect level. There are only milestones that you set according to your goals. For any given level, how long it takes depends primarily on two key factors:

1. Approximately how many hours are required to reach your desired level
2. How much time you can spend every day—this is the primary factor determining if you can achieve your goal or not

Beginners often underestimate the amount of time it takes to learn a language. If you want a good ballpark estimate of how much time you need, you can use the [United States Foreign Service Institute's Language Difficulty Ranking](#), which lists the approximate class hours required to reach a competent level.

For an easier language like Spanish or French, most people take around 1–2 years to reach a good level. If you studied 10 hours per day, every day, you could potentially reach the same level in around three months. If you think you can't reach your desired goals given the time available, you need to either make time or adjust your goal's timing.

1.2 Language levels

To help you set a goal, it is helpful to understand the [CEFR levels](#).

The A1 and A2 levels roughly correspond to what people call a "beginner". Learners that have reached the A2 stage can understand sentences and frequently used expressions and can communicate simple ideas.

B1 and B2 are what most people call an "intermediate" learner, particularly B1. B1 learners know enough to get by and can at least understand the main point of a lot of what they hear. There is a big jump to B2, at which point the learner can comfortably interact with native speakers. This is about where most learners would consider themselves "fluent" in a language.

C1 and C2 speakers are the advanced levels. This corresponds with a strong ability at both understanding and using the language in all situations.

In reality, the way people use the words “beginner” and “intermediate” is hazy. People will often refer to A2 learners as being intermediate, and B2 learners as being advanced, particularly those who are good at speaking.

1.3 Set a goal

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

To learn a language, you should first set yourself a goal or set of goals. Spend some time properly considering what motivates you to learn your language and the situations you want to use it in. This will dictate the level you need to reach and the kinds of skills you need to focus on. Write your goals down somewhere.

The best goals are **SMART goals**. That is, they are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

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

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

Achievable—Don’t aim too high. You can’t be fluent in a year without working at it for hours each day.

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

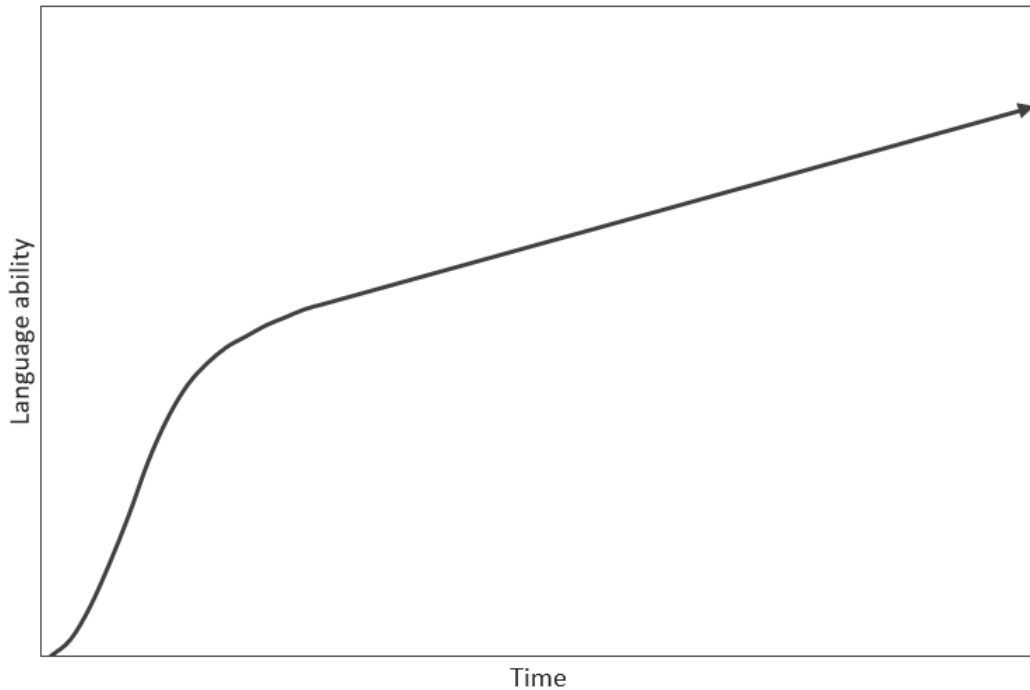
Time-bound—Picking a point in time discourages you from slacking off and letting progress slow.

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

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

1.4 How you progress

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



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

Conversely, progress beyond the early intermediate stages will feel slower by comparison. Every new word or form you learn will be much more rare. Becoming fluent means becoming familiar with an ocean of unknown words, nuance, idioms, and complex grammar. Reaching high levels of aural comprehension and pronunciation will take a similarly long time. While you might not need all these forms, idioms, and words to get by, they comprise native-level ability.

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

1.5 You are better at language learning than you think

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

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

Second, **language learning is not as hard as it seems.** While many people recall struggling

to learn a language in school, this is more the fault of the school's curriculum.¹ By using content to let the language come to you, the process of learning will seem far less effortful.

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

1.6 Your mileage may vary

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

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

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

1.7 What you will learn

Languages consist of two core components:

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

The language is expressed through any of the four skills:

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

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

Languages are more than the sum of their parts. For example, simply knowing words and grammar won't tell you which words tend to go together, nor will it help you understand idioms. In addition, languages are interwoven with their culture, and may frequently express concepts

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

that are unfamiliar to you. All of these are aspects of your language you will encounter in your learning.

Once you start the intermediate stages you will have:

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

To get there, you need the three core resources. This is what we will look at in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Resources

This chapter will show you how to find resources and help you think about which ones will work for you. After that, we'll be looking at how you put them together to make a language method.

2.1 How to find resources

There are three good ways to find resources:

1. Google search for communities of learners that are learning your target language—often there will be lists of recommended resources or a popular post by a user
2. Google search for guides or articles about learning your target language
3. Language repositories—these will be explained next

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

Language repositories

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

Table 2.1: *Some popular language resource repositories*

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

2.2 Choosing resources

Because there are many resources that only deal with one language, this guide does not represent the full range of high-quality resources available. Your own research should hopefully unearth more recommendations from other learners. If you don't find anything, you'll still have this chapter.

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

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

2.3 The three core resources

There are many different types of resources; however, there are three core classes we will look at in the next chapter:

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

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

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

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

The three core classes of resource are crucial for developing your method.

Next we will look at each of these types of resource and what to look for.

2.4 Beginner course

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

1. **Online text, audio, or video explanations**—websites, podcasts, or video series that explain the basics of your language
2. **Teach-yourself books**—books that provide explanations, exercises, and beginner input (highly popular)
3. **Online courses**—often websites and/or apps with their own methodology (also very popular)
4. **Listen-and-repeat courses**—courses that function by having you listen to phrases and then repeatedly prompting you to recall and say them out loud
5. **Classes**—teachers in a classroom

6. **Tutors**—one-on-one teaching**Table 2.2:** *Some good examples of beginner courses*

Course	Examples
Text, audio, or video explanations	YouTube videos Free online lectures/courses such as listed here Assimil (paid, audio) BBC Languages (free) Live Lingua Project (free resources) FSI, DLI, and Peace Corps language courses
Teach-yourself books	Colloquial series
Online courses	Duolingo (free) LingVist (paid) Busuu (free with paid premium) Glossika (paid) Babbel (paid) Mango Languages (paid) StoryLearning (paid with a free 7 day trial)
Listen-and-repeat courses	Language Transfer (free) Coffee Break Languages (free) Pimsleur (paid)

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

What makes a good beginner course?

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

A good course:

- Focuses on teaching the language in context using input
- Has interesting lessons or content
- Uses interactive lessons
- Covers all the bases: grammar, vocabulary, and the four skills
- Allows you to follow your interest
- Provides the appropriate amount of information to enable learning

A bad course:

- Uses few examples or minimal content
- Has boring content or presentation
- Lets lessons be easily completed by passively reading or watching
- Focuses too much on one aspect and/or ignores other aspects
- Forces you to complete drills or activities before you can move on
- Ignores grammar or does not provide any explanation when needed

No course is perfect, but the downsides of the course you use can be countered by the other components of your method. It is common for learners to use multiple courses where their relative strengths and weaknesses balance out. For example, you may use a tutor in addition to your course to practice speaking and get better explanations; or you might use a teach yourself book in addition to a listen-and-repeat course to help improve your vocabulary and listening.

The different types of courses I outlined also have their own advantages and disadvantages.

Table 2.3: *Advantages and disadvantages of each of the six types of beginner course*

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



Key tip: Change courses if you need to

Learners commonly change courses as they reach a point where their current one becomes boring or too easy. Switching is a valid choice if your new course still challenges you and helps you learn; however, I don't advise you do so repeatedly.



Key tip: Use multiple courses at once

It is also common to use multiple courses where their relative strengths and weaknesses balance out. For example, you may use a tutor in addition to your course to practice speaking and get better explanations; or you might use a teach yourself book in addition to a listen-and-repeat course to help improve your vocabulary and listening.

Using listen-and-repeat courses

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

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

Using Tutors

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

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

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

Budget

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

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

2.5 Flashcard program

Flashcards are a powerful tool used primarily to learn new words and grammatical forms. While you can make them by hand, these days we have apps to make the process simpler and more

convenient.

Table 2.4: *Some good flashcard software*

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

What makes a good flashcard system?

The best flashcard programs use spaced repetition. This works by automatically spacing out your revision using something called the [forgetting curve](#). When you first learn a word, you are shown it again at very short intervals. With each revision, the interval becomes longer and longer until the word is safe in your long-term memory.

Anki

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

Anki allows its users to export and share flashcard decks they make. There are many pre-made shared decks for you to use to get started [here](#). 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.

Settings

Anki has a large amount of settings to change the behaviour of the “again”, “hard”, “good” and “easy” options. If you're overwhelmed by all the options, the defaults will be sufficient to get started. You may find it helpful to use the fantastic setup guide and introduction [here](#). Keep in mind, their [recommended settings](#) are optimised for single words. If you use sentences, you will need to make it a bit more supportive with new cards and reviews. You can also find some clear video explanations [here](#) and [here](#).

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

2.6 Input

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

is always good.

Here are some examples of input you might use:

Table 2.5: *Examples of input*

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

What makes good input?

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

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

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

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

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

Table 2.6: Popular sources of input

Source	Description
Easy Languages YouTube channel	Street interviews with dual-language subtitles—quality beginner content in lots of languages
Language Input, Language Reactor YouTube catalogue	Catalogues of good subtitled YouTube videos/channels in lots of languages
Netflix	Great source of foreign language TV and movies with subtitles
Olingo	Shows you some good YouTube content for some of the most popular languages
eja.tv	Live TV
r/languagelearning media section	A list of good media resources
Project Gutenberg, Wikibooks, Loyal Books	Free public domain e-books
Gloss	Website with a lot of beginner content
The Fable Cottage	Dual-language fairy tales
Books by Olly Richards	<i>Conversations</i> and <i>Short Stories</i> series of books available on Amazon

You can also use other learners' guides online to find good input.



Key tip: Use a variety of different content

Make sure your content has a lot of variety in terms of the context and skills it uses. It is surprisingly difficult to translate your language ability from one skill into another without a lot of practice. For example, reading lots will help you learn a lot of words, but you will struggle to recognise these words when you hear them until you've done a lot of listening practice. One good heuristic is to look for content that contains at least some audio and some written. Starting with audio early will help your communication in the long run. In addition, using a range of resources will give you exposure to different vocabulary, accents, and degrees of formality that will help your overall ability.

Popular tools

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

Table 2.7: Popular tools

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

2.7 Other resources

Language exchange resources

Later in your learning, it will be useful to find ways to practise your language with others. These resources will help you find partners.

Table 2.8: Language exchange resources

Resource	Description
Tandem , HelloTalk	The two largest language exchange apps
Conversation Exchange , My Language Exchange , The Mixxer	Websites for finding exchange partners. These sites are more basic than the apps, though some might consider that an advantage.
LangCorrect	A community focused of submitting your writing and having it corrected by native speakers
Journaly	Service to help you write journals and get your writing corrected by others

Dictionaries

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

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

Table 2.9: Popular online dictionaries

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

Translators

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

Table 2.10: Popular translation software

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

Phrasebooks

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

Here are some websites you might like to use:

Table 2.11: Online phrasebooks

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

**Key tip: Use resources you enjoy**

Studying languages is not always the most exciting activity, so choosing resources that you enjoy helps a lot. Keep in mind that there is plenty of room for individual preference for resources when it comes to what is the most effective way to learn. Use what you like and don't worry too much about what others recommend. If you find yourself getting bored with a resource, feel free to change it.

Resources are worth very little on their own. Next we will cover how to use your resources together by building a method.

Chapter 3

Building a Method

A method is the combination of resources and exercises you use to learn a language. As a beginner, your goal is to build the skills you need to reach an intermediate level as outlined in [What you will learn](#) as fast as possible.

In this chapter I will provide an overview of how to build a method of your own.

3.1 The four keys of an effective method

Unfortunately, there is no specific method that stands out as the best for me to outline for you, though some are more effective than others. Instead, individual preference and interest seem to be better predictors of success.¹ All of this means I can't simply outline a good method for you to follow. You have a lot of flexibility, and how you personally respond to different exercises and resources should dictate how you adjust your method. To help get you started, this section discusses the four key elements common to all good methods. These are:

1. Goal-focus
2. Structure
3. Drill key skills
4. Practise your language

Goal-focus

Having a goal and properly striving towards it is one of the most important facets of an effective method. We will begin this section with the key principle, then I will explain how to execute it.



Principle: Work towards your goals

One of the best things you can do for your progress is to focus on your goals and the skills you need to get there. This will help you stay motivated and ensure that what you are doing is aligned to what you want out of your language. Spend time considering your goals, then work towards them relentlessly.

This first component of goal-focus is to **have a goal or set of goals**. These are key for retaining motivation. If you don't have a goal, head back to the start of this guide and ensure you do.

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

The second component is to **work towards your goals by actively studying the skills and vocabulary you need for your goal**. This will be covered in the section [Drill key skills](#) below.

The final component is to **seek out and directly practise situations involving your goals**. This will be covered in the section [Practise your language](#) below.

Structure

Structure in language learning is crucial. There are three sub-elements to this: Build a base, push yourself, and balance. Two of these are so crucial they are key principles, so pay attention to them!

Build a base



Principle: Build a base and work up

Begin with the simplest and most beginner-friendly components of your language, then gradually build towards more advanced ones as you progress. Focus on the components that help you improve the most. Without a base level of understanding, it will be harder to understand and learn more advanced concepts or comprehend content that uses them.

Unless something really interests you, I recommend you avoid jumping too far ahead and learning nuanced grammar points or advanced vocabulary when there are plenty of more applicable aspects of your language to learn. You will get far more mileage from the basic stuff.

Courses are highly recommended in-part because they provide all the structure you need to build a comprehensive foundation in the language. If any aspect of your learning required for you to achieve your goals is not well-covered by your beginner course, you should seek to learn it separately.

Push yourself

The second sub-component of structure is pushing yourself and is an important technique to avoid your progress stagnating. This sub-component is also our next principle:



Principle: Push yourself

During your study, you will inevitably find certain resources or content eventually become easy for you. The key to a good method is that you move on as soon as you begin to feel too comfortable with a resource. There will always be something more challenging for you to try. By continually challenging yourself, you will be constantly pushed to improve.

This applies to everything you use, including course materials, content, and flashcards.

Balance

Balance means your learning has an appropriate balance of vocabulary, grammar, and the four skills. Spread your time out among the different aspects of your language. Learning a bit of vocabulary will aid your learning of grammar and vice versa. While you should focus on those skills most important to your goal, don't neglect the others altogether.

Drill key skills

A drill is an exercise that isolates a single aspect of your language so that you can develop it separately from the others. Your method should incorporate drills where you have weaknesses, often caused by your course neglecting certain aspects of your language. There are many examples, including flashcards, practising pronunciation, and writing word forms.

The key drill I recommend using is flashcards. We will discuss flashcards later [here](#). Later, as you improve, I recommend you move to drilling with content. This is covered in the guide [here](#). We will look at a larger list of drills later [here](#).

Practise your language

Practising your language integrates everything you have learned together. Examples include speaking with people, writing texts, or reading stories. It is usually less prevalent during the beginner stages, but will gradually take a larger role as you progress. Without practice, all of the knowledge and skills you build through your study will not translate into real-world language ability.

The best type of practice is *direct practice*,² which means your practice time should be spent directly doing whatever your goal is. If your goal is to speak your language, your practice should involve talking to native speakers as much as possible.

Ensure you spend plenty of time using content—it is crucial to progressing in your language. Many intermediate learners spend up to 75

A helpful activity, extensive reading, will be covered later [here](#) with more advice [here](#).

Combining drill and practice

While drilling alone can be immensely beneficial, these individual skills will not automatically translate into ability with whatever situations your goal involves (such as speaking with people). Similarly, practice can be very powerful, but you will likely progress slower than you might otherwise without time spent working on your weaknesses.

The optimal method balances the two. As a part of your direct practice, you should base your drills off the weaknesses you discover through your language practice, focusing on those which are holding you back from doing the practice at a higher level. For example, imagine you practise through conversation, but find yourself only understanding once your interlocutor repeats themselves more slowly. Your next study session could utilise a podcast episode in which you repeatedly listen to specific parts until you can make out the words, only using a transcript where strictly necessary. This would help you build listening comprehension for fast speech that lets your next conversation practice progress with less hinderance.

²This concept comes from Scott Young in his book, [Ultralearning](#)

3.2 Using other learners' methods

I recommend you find some ideas for your method while you search for resources. There are plenty of places on the internet where people have detailed their own method. You can often find these with a simple Google search along the lines of “How to learn Japanese”. Take the useful bits of other people’s methods you find. Remember: the specifics of any method aren’t the key, so don’t stress about following someone’s method exactly.

Beware: there are a lot of cookie-cutter, search-engine-optimised, low-effort guides out there. It’s not a universal rule, but my general experience is that better guides are often written by individuals on their own websites or on language learning communities.

Using others’ methods is useful for two reasons. First, they will often give good resource recommendations and advice on integrating them into your method, which I can’t give you here. Second, you will often find good advice on your specific language, such as common beginner pitfalls or useful areas to focus your attention.

3.3 Turning everything into a method

This section is to help illustrate what your method might look like.

To summarise the guide so far, we have three kinds of resources: courses, flashcards, and input, and we need to turn it into a method that is goal-focused, structured, builds key skills, and involves language practice.

If you’ve followed the basic resource examples or found something similar, the method and resources should hopefully map on to each other quite well. If you’ve decided to use something a bit different, don’t worry! Simply check your method against the four elements to make sure you’re applying them all.

Where you spend your time

How much time you spend with each resource will change over time depending on your level, the particular resources you find, and your goals.

Your level: At the beginning, your level is generally too low to gain much benefit from content. You first need to create a base for yourself. **Learners generally progress from a point of mostly just using their course with some supplementary drilling, later transitioning to spending almost all of their time with content.**³

Your resources: Different courses often emphasise different skills, which will create relative weaknesses in other areas. For example, if your course uses little content and focuses on exercises, you have a greater need to supplement your learning with content.

Your goals: Different goals naturally lend themselves to different skillsets and vocabulary. If you need to communicate in the near-term, you should be drilling key skills (speaking and listening) much more and earlier. If you are learning for business, you could seek out and drill business vocabulary, or otherwise find business-related content.

³It is completely possible to use content extensively from the very beginning. The trouble is you’d simply have to spend most of your time with a dictionary and grammar resource, constantly looking things up, which is neither efficient nor fun.

To help illustrate all this more clearly, the next section shows you a typical progression, but keep in mind how you will differ.

A typical method

Here is how you might spend your time at the start:

- Spend most of your time progressing through your beginner course to learn vocabulary and grammar
- Spend a bit of time on the side drilling vocabulary using flashcards
- Learn the skills you need for your goal through your beginner course or a supplementary resource if necessary; focus heavily on learning the writing system if it is different

Then, as you become more comfortable with the language, you begin reading and/or listening with some beginner-centred input.

After some time, once they know around 800 words, the basic grammar, and the basics of the four skills, most learners' method change a bit. How yours changes will depend on your goals.

Intermediate learners:

- usually focus more on activities to build ability with the skills they need to meet their goals, using supplemental resources if necessary
- usually begin to read, watch, or listen to intermediate-level content, whatever they personally enjoy
- usually begin speaking with native speakers
- sometimes focus more on building their vocabulary every day using flashcards extensively
- sometimes practise with a personal tutor, getting feedback on your weaknesses

Other options for activities

There are lots other ways to structure your method while following the three key requirements. For example:

- You could forego courses in favour of reading lots, looking up concepts as necessary
- You could drill by using a vocabulary list or writing sentences instead of flashcards⁴
- Your source of input could be mostly practising speaking with a friend or tutor rather than books or videos
- You could focus heavily on learning mostly through traditional classes

These are all valid choices for the right learner.

What milestones to aim for

In addition to your goals, you should have a set of intermediate-level milestones you are looking to achieve. What you consider success is determined by what your goal is, so here I will simply give you an indication of the kind of ability a good intermediate learner has.

A typical intermediate learner:

⁴While there are learners that do this, I don't recommend you go without using flashcards, other drills, or courses until you are a more experienced learner and better understand what works for you.

- knows over 2,000 Words, but aim to know about 3,000 and don't stop there
- is fairly good at the skills most important for achieving their goals
- is able to make it through a conversation with a native speaker, as long as they are accommodating
- can understand learner-centred content, though native-level content will still be confusing
- has a good grasp of the language's grammar, though is far from comfortable with all of it

Chapter 4

Your Study Routine

Now that we've discussed what to do with your time, we turn to the when and where of your learning: your routine.

This chapter has four sections:

1. How much time to spend
2. When to spend your time
3. Integrating your language into your life
4. Staying motivated

4.1 How much time to spend

Languages require a certain number of hours to achieve a high level at, and you cannot cheat your way out of this requirement. This brings us to one of the most important principles:



Principle: Spend as much time as you can with your language

The key factor determining how fast you learn your language is **time**. If you want to improve quickly, aim to spend as much time as possible learning. The more the better. It is far more important than having the perfect technique or using the perfect resource.

To help build your time with the language, it is important to study every day. Ideally, **commit to study at least an hour per day**. There is no maximum—the more you can commit each day, the faster you will progress.

4.2 When to spend your time

The best technique is to build a routine. To do this, have a set time each day you devote to study without any pauses or distractions. It helps if a block deals with a single resource, such as an article, course lesson, workbook chapter, or podcast episode.

It also helps to intersperse your learning. As long as you are doing a block of at least 20 minutes, then the rest of your learning can be interspersed throughout the day. Similarly, try to study consistently every day rather than doing it all at the end of the week.

There are lots of clever ways to help you spend more time than you otherwise would. We will look at these next.

4.3 Integrating your language into your life

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

- Switch the language of the media you consume
- Try to find a friend or group of friends that speak your target language
- Change the language of the devices you use
- Once you are good enough, try to think in your target language

A big advantage of the modern world is you can easily take your study materials and content with you wherever you go. To do some extra learning, you can use the small bits of downtime throughout your day, such as on the bus, in a queue, or walking between class. Here are a few ideas:

- Get a pen pal on a chat app such those listed in the [table of language exchange resources](#); use any downtime to read and send messages
- Use digital flashcards on your phone
- Use a beginner course that has a smartphone app
- Listen to podcasts while cooking, cleaning, walking, or during any activity where you don't have to carefully focus
- Carry a book with you

4.4 Staying motivated



Principle: Keep up your motivation

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

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

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

- **Work towards your goals**—Striving towards your goals, making progress, and successfully engaging with those parts of the language can be a motivating experience. It can be helpful to keep your goals around you. For example, hanging around with speakers of the language you are learning.
- **Refresh**—If you feel yourself stagnating, try changing your routine by studying at a different time, studying in a different place, doing exercises you wouldn't usually do, or using content you don't usually use.

4.5 Summary of the book so far

Before we move on, it will be helpful to review what we have covered.

Find a goal and build a method. Ensure you include the three keys: structure, drills, and practice. You can use a basic method at the start, but there are plenty of ideas you can get from others. How you split your time is up to you, but be sure that content retains an important position. Spend at least 20 minutes a day in focused study. Increase your time with the language by integrating it into your life. Keep up your motivation by choosing resources that you enjoy using.

4.6 Moving forward

You are now in a good position to start studying. All you need to do is begin searching for resources, then build a basic method and you are ready to start. From here, we will be looking at how to do your method better. I will start with a section on using the core resources effectively. I will then move to learning effectively. I finish the core portion of the guide with a set of three key activities that are great for any learner from upper-beginner onwards. If you have time, I recommend you continue to read after this chapter.

Chapter 5

Using Resources Effectively

The purpose of this chapter is to help improve your method using the core resources from the earlier chapter on finding resources. We will cover how to use your course, flashcards, content, and dictionary.

5.1 Using your course effectively

The purpose of a course is to introduce you to basic grammar and vocabulary using phrases, explanations, exercises, dialogues, or whatever method is preferred by your chosen course.

The best way to improve your usage of your course is by using the following principle:



Principle: Don't try to learn things perfectly the first time you encounter them

Learning happens slowly over time, usually well after you are first introduced to a word or concept. The very act of moving forward with a loose understanding will help teach you things already covered as you encounter them again.

You don't need a perfect understanding of a lesson before you begin the next. Knowing a language is far more than memorising rules and definitions. Notice that you speak your native language perfectly well, but would struggle to talk about the grammatical rules you are applying. The same applies to your target language. This means that you should avoid trying to memorise your lesson content. Languages must be acquired, not memorised.

There's no prescribed way to use your course. Many learners prefer to skim through workbooks or online resources to get a broad understanding before using content. Other learners make their own workbook, writing down the key words, insights, or grammatical forms of every lesson.¹

When to stop using a beginner course

You can move on once your course finishes or you have dealt with the core grammar, such as verb conjugations and noun declensions, articles, and prepositions. This occurs faster with languages that are more similar to your native language. After that point, it helps to use your course or some other book or website as a reference of forms to take note of when you are using content.

It is helpful to finish your course. This will give you a wider knowledge base that will let you recognise forms you might miss otherwise.

¹If you choose to do this, keep in mind it can be very time-consuming.



Principle: Repetition

Words and grammatical forms will be apprehended only once your brain is exposed to them enough times.

There are three main ways learners get repetition. First, content provides natural repetition as the most common words and forms are encountered frequently in context. Second, drills such as flashcards that are designed to repeatedly prompt you until you remember. Finally, you can consciously repeat the same piece of content multiple times or review past lessons.

The best repetition follows the principle of [spaced repetition](#), where reviews are done just before the learner forgets. Try to encounter new words or forms again soon after you first learn them.

5.2 Using flashcards effectively

Those who emphasise learning lots of words via flashcards usually recommend doing so for the purpose of enabling you to quickly move on to using content. Keep this in mind if you end up using flashcards heavily. They are still a drill and a supplement—their purpose is to aid your use of the language, not as an end goal in of itself.

Here are a few good tips for you to keep in mind:

- Don't learn too many new words at once—you will be fine to start, but reviews will quickly overwhelm you
- Try to study consistently every day
- Make your own cards of words you want to learn
- Regularly delete or suspend cards that are too easy or aren't working for you for any reason—you can always learn it later
- Use phrases—I will cover this soon
- If you use Anki, tweak the settings a bit

Productive and receptive learning

There are two ways you can review your cards:

1. Prompt with native language, answer with target language (productive learning)
2. Prompt with target language, answer with native language (receptive learning)

Productive learning means you are trying to *produce* your target language. Productive learning is the more difficult of the two, and card review is generally slower as a result. On the positive side, productive learning is great for forcing your mind to absorb a word or phrase properly, meaning you tend to learn more thoroughly and in a way that lets you begin using that knowledge sooner.

Receptive learning means you are simply being repeatedly exposed to words or phrases in your target language and asked to recall their meaning. This method is faster, but generally helps much more with understanding than it does producing your target language. This can be great for getting you using content quickly.

I recommend a combination of both, based on your needs. What you do should be determined by your goals. Some words you might need to be using soon, so you might practise them productively. Others might just be helpful for using content, but not something you expect to need soon, so you'd practise them receptively.



Key tip: Aim to get about 90 percent of your cards correct

As I have noted, flashcards utilise the forgetting curve to try to prompt you with a word just before you forget it. You will begin to notice that this doesn't always work perfectly. Sometimes you will have already forgotten a word, forcing you to relearn it, but other times you will get the answer easily. While you can improve your retention by setting Anki to show you your cards more often, this has the effect of slowing down your study, as you will see cards you know comfortably far too often. Conversely, if you set Anki to show you cards less often, you may find yourself forgetting lots of words before you see them again. The best spot sits in the middle. Aim to "strategically forget" about 10 percent of your cards. In the long run this will save you time.

Phrases

While you can learn words on their own, **I recommend you use phrases**. Learning phrases with their translation is useful for lots of reasons:

- They can teach you key phrases for early communication or travelling
- They help you use more complex but common constructions earlier in your learning
- They provide insight into how the language is used
- They provide context for how words are used and what other words tend to be used with them
- They can teach you grammar by forcing you to absorb certain forms
- They give you passive exposure to other words, cementing them in your mind

When you use phrases receptively, you are generating repeated exposure. This is great for giving you context for a words usage, but you are unlikely to remember the phrase well.

When you use phrases productively, you build a strong recall of the phrase, which is useful when you want to remember a construction so you can use it yourself. This is less useful for building a large passive vocabulary because it is slower.

Putting it together: how to make your flashcards

The different combinations: phrases and words, productive and receptive learning make for a large number of possibilities for your flashcards. Not all are ideal, so I will narrow it down to the few I think work best.

I recommend your flashcard usage include one type from the productive methods and one from the receptive methods. Learn words receptively with an example phrase to quickly improve your vocabulary and help you read and listen; learn phrases productively with a word or

construction highlighted to absorb the usage of the language. Focus on words and forms you find useful.

Here some ways you can structure your flashcards:

Productive flashcards

Key phrase: The front side contains a phrase, and the rear its target language translation. Try to produce the whole phrase correctly. This is ideal for very common phrases (such as “I’m not sure”) or phrases you need for travelling (“Where is the bathroom?”). Keep them as simple as possible, because larger sentences can be said correctly in a variety of ways and there’s little point to memorising only one.

Cloze deletion: Anki also allows for [cloze-deletion](#). This shows a phrase in your target language with a single word either hidden or replaced with its translation in your native language. Attempt to produce the word in your target language. This works much like the above method, but the context phrase is more relevant since it focuses on your target language. Beware: this only works well if you already understand the rest of the phrase.

Word/form + phrase: The front side contains a word or grammatical form with a phrase to help with context, both in your native language. Alternatively, you can simply highlight or bold the relevant word/form. The rear side can include information on the word/form, such as its translation/s and/or a definition. Mark the card correct if you manage to produce the correct word or form in your target language. You can attempt to get the phrase correct if you want, too, but mark yourself correct even if you don’t get it all. This helps you learn to produce a word or form’s translation, while the phrase helps with context and gives you exposure to the language. This type of card is useful for learning grammar and words you need to use soon.

Word/form + phrase - hard mode: The card is the same as above, but you attempt to get both the word/form and its phrase completely correct. This is the slowest and most thorough card you can use. This ensures you properly absorb at least one correct usage of the target word or form. This is a valid alternative, but I don’t recommend this as the cards are generally too hard and slow. You are better off creating 3 easy cards instead of one hard one.

Receptive flashcards

Word/form + phrase: The front side contains a word with a phrase to help with context, both in your target language. The rear side generally includes the word’s definition/s and a translation of the sentence. Attempt to understand the sentence and the word in context. This helps you recognise words in context. Beware: the support phrase can make these cards too easy, as you may be able to read the phrase and get the word using only the context.

Word/form + hidden phrase: The front side contains a word or form in your target language. The rear side of the card reveals the word’s meaning and its usage in context in your target language. Anki has a “hint” functionality that lets you hide things and reveal them on the front side with a single press, which can let you reveal the sentence before you see the word’s meaning. Only mark the card as correct if you recall the word’s meaning/s without the help of the phrase. This helps you recall a word’s usage without relying on its surrounding context.

Dual-sided cards

Anki allows you to create dual-sided cards, meaning creating one card actually creates two: one target language first (receptive) and one native language first (productive). This would typically be a *word/form + phrase* type card. This has two flaws: 1, as I noted, receptive flashcards are easier, so it is difficult to make a two-sided flashcard with the right difficulty, and 2, you will have double the cards for your word/form, so it may be too easy overall or simply too slow. You can get around this in part by simply suspending the receptive card later on as it becomes too easy.



Key tip: Keep your flashcards simple

Learning something new takes focused effort, so you can only really memorise one thing at a time. Flashcards work best when there is only a minimal amount of new information. The key information in your flashcard should be either one new word or one grammatical form. If you use a phrase in support, that phrase should ideally not contain any other new words or forms, though this can be acceptable if context makes its meaning obvious. Avoid using phrases that are long or consist of multiple sentences.

If you have lots of information you want to learn, split it into multiple cards.

Essential phrases

I also recommend you learn some essential phrases such as “how do you say...”, or “what’s the time”. These are very useful for understanding how native speakers express themselves and will help you a lot when first communicating. These are usually learned productively.

Make your own flashcards or use pre-made decks?

In the ideal world, learners make their own flashcards based on their needs. If you find vocabulary that you want to know and use sentences that you have chosen, learning them becomes easier as you are more motivated and pay closer attention to what you are learning. There is a helpful video [here](#) on how to do it. However, making flashcards is a lengthy process that many people do not enjoy or want to commit to.

If you use Anki, you will remember the shared decks from the resources section. These can be your saviour. Pre-made decks can be useful because a lot of the hard work has already been done for you. On the other hand, pre-made decks are often not formatted in the ideal manner. The good thing about Anki is that it is completely customisable. You can change these decks to suit your needs. Check the documentation or search for some guides online.

Unfortunately, Anki’s interface is not very intuitive, and learning to use it to its fullest extent and modify cards takes a bit of time. If you would rather not spend the extra time learning a new program, you will need to decide for yourself if you are fine with the deck you have found or want to search for something else.

5.3 Using input effectively

Here is the key rule: It takes a lot of exposure to get comfortable using the language, so try to use as much content as you can in your study.

How you use input depends a lot on what you are doing. There are two broad types of activity: those in which you sit and focus with a difficult piece of content in order to learn something new (active learning), and those in which you simply use content for enjoyment without focused study (passive learning). You will do both during your study. Content used for passive learning tends to be easier.

No matter how you use it, the key to input is that you try to understand as much as possible.



Principle: Engage your memory

One key to effective learning is by actively using your memory during the learning process. This means, as much as possible, try to actively recall the meaning of words and forms you encounter. Don't just passively read or instantly turn to a dictionary or textbook for answers. Flashcards are built on this principle by forcing you to attempt to recall a word's definition before you can see the answer.



Key tip: Repeat the same content multiple times

Repetition is important to learning. By re-using the same piece of content, the words and forms you encounter there will be much more likely to stick in your mind.

What input should I use?

This is covered further in the section [Comprehensible input](#). There are two key criteria:

1. How interested you are in it
2. How understandable it is

One way to ensure interest is to **use content similar to what you already find interesting in your native language**. That is, do the things you already enjoy doing, but using your target language instead. This can be watching YouTube or TV shows, reading comic books, or even gaming. As a beginner, finding good content can be hard, especially for those learning rare languages. You may have to compromise and choose something less interesting because it is closer to your level.

Your content should already be mostly understandable, meaning you already understand 90–98% of it. This is the principle [Use the language in order to learn it](#).



Principle: Your level +1

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

What precisely +1 means depends on what you are studying. An audio recording with 100% known vocabulary counts as +1 if you struggle with aural comprehension.

For more info, read [Your level +1 in your content](#) and [Difficulty + successful recall](#) in the appendix.

5.4 Using dictionaries and translators effectively

Dictionaries and translators are a learning aide that are best used to get the meaning of **key unknown words**.

More important than what you do is what you avoid doing. Here are four key **don'ts**:

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

5.5 Chapter summary

Avoid memorising your lesson content or trying to learn your lessons perfectly the first time. It is better to move on with an incomplete understanding.

Flashcards are best used by prompting with both your target language and your native language. This ensures you encounter words and forms in a variety of ways. Make sure you use simple sentences with your flashcards.

Input is best used in mass amounts. Use input that is already mostly comprehensible.

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

Chapter 6

How to Learn Your Language

In this chapter we will look at how you learn your language, starting from the core principle, then moving on to the three ways you learn: discover, practice, and drill. Subsequent chapters will look at grammar, vocabulary, and the four skills.

6.1 Comprehensible input

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



Principle: Use the language in order to learn it

The best way for you to learn a language is by engaging with it meaningfully, achieving comprehension of real information. To do that you need a large amount of input that is both **comprehensible** and **interesting to you**. That can mean reading texts, listening to podcasts, watching videos, writing stories, finding native speakers to practise with, or anything else that takes your fancy. Languages are learned when you encounter grammar and vocabulary and are prompted to recall their meaning or produce it in context.

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

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

6.2 Discover, practice, drill

Discover, **practice**, and **drill** are the three fundamental ways you come to apprehend some aspect of your language. All three are embodied by the three core resources I recommended earlier. This section will discuss what they are, then talk about how to do them well.

Discover

In many ways, discovery is the simplest aspect of learning a language. This is where you seek and discover or are informed about some aspect of your language. This can be through your beginner course, looking up words in a dictionary, watching YouTube videos, or reading about a rule on someone's blog, for example.

The counterpart to discovery would be absorption, where you subconsciously apprehend words and forms just by being exposed to your language. This is how you learned a lot of your native language.

Your course should be full of avenues for you to discover aspects of your language. The key thing I want you to take away from this section is how powerful discovery is. Just being made aware of a word's definition or a grammatical form and how it works makes your eventual apprehension of it much faster than trying to understand it by pure exposure.



Principle: Noticing

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

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

As discussed in the above section on comprehensible input, just discovering a new word or form will not make you learn it. For that you need practice.

Practice

Practising is the act of using your language for your goal in an integrated fashion. Practice blends and hones the skills and knowledge you already have with less focus on gaining new knowledge. There are two key forms of practice, **input** and **output**, and they help you apprehend words and forms in different ways.

Any activity can involve one or the other, but will often be both at once. You can compare reading or writing, which only involve one form, to conversation practice, which requires both input and output.

Input

By being exposed to forms and words repeatedly in context, you will eventually come to remember them and understand how they are used. Using input well can be done by using the above principle *Use the language in order to learn it*. The best input is comprehensible and interesting to you.

Output

Output often features less prominently in beginner methods. This is for a good reason—it is difficult to benefit from output when you know very little of the language.

There are two key ways output can benefit you:

1. Recalling and using a word or form is a very good way of solidifying it in your memory
2. Output enables other learners or native speakers to give you feedback—this is a very important aspect of reaching a high level

Beware: output has a hidden danger. While it solidifies words and forms in your mind, there is no guarantee the output you create is native-like. This can mean you accidentally solidify ways of speaking that don't sound natural to a native speaker. Avoiding this will be discussed [the chapter on mistakes](#).

Despite its potential pitfalls, output is an incredibly important part of your language learning method, especially as you approach the intermediate stage. A great activity, conversation practice, will be covered later [here](#).

Drill

Drilling is the act of trying to improve a specific component of language by doing an activity that focuses only on that, without worrying as much about how it fits in the broader language.

Drilling works by reducing your cognitive load, which is essentially the number of things you have to hold in your working memory. This lets you dedicate all of your brain power to learning one thing, where normally you would be distracted by all the other elements of your language and struggle to pick it up as fast. Drills are ideal for isolating and improving on an individual weakness. Exercises such as practising pronunciation, textbook activities, and flashcards all count as drills. In the beginner stage, you don't need to worry too much about picking the perfect drill—flashcards get you most of the way there. Later, we will look at a larger set of drills you could do [here](#).

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

A good drill exercise:

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

A bad drill would:

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

I recommend you avoid drilling too much. A lot of the skills learners choose to drill will be developed naturally over time with input.

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

Chapter 7

Grammar and Vocabulary

In this section we'll be looking at how to improve your acquisition of grammar and vocabulary.

7.1 Grammar

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

Your initial grammar learning comes from your beginner course. This can be supplemented by exercises such as sentence flashcards and exercises; however, this should not be the majority of your time. Most of the grammar you will learn over time with input.¹



Key tip: Do not rely on memorising grammar rules

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



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.

Flashcard phrases for grammar

Learners commonly experience difficulty remembering how to use grammar when first speaking, or simply struggle to remember how the rule works in context. For this, memorising phrases can be very powerful.

¹There are some learners who go mostly without studying grammar. This is done by compensating with lots of input, making sure to notice grammatical forms as you encounter them. It is best not to go without studying grammar until you are more experienced. Further discussion of the debate on the efficacy of grammar instruction can be found [in the appendix](#).

Grammar flashcards generally consist of a single sentence, as simple as possible, that demonstrates the particular grammatical rule used in context. This might be as simple as creating a set of cards for all the verb conjugations, one for each type. It can be helpful to bold or highlight the particular feature you want to focus on.

Productive learning is preferred over receptive because understanding grammar receptively is generally too easy to do when you have context, especially for languages closer to English. However, these cards can be very difficult and slow if the form is new to you. You may need to ease yourself in by first using receptive flashcards or spending some time reading.

I recommend you use phrases from your course or the internet to ensure they are correct—grammar can be very easy to get wrong as a beginner.

7.2 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is generally the more underrated of the two core components. A huge portion of speaking a language is really just knowing enough words. Think about how often you struggle to understand the sense of what is being said because of a new grammatical construct versus not recognising a word. Words are a far more common barrier.

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



Key tip: Prioritise words over grammar

Prioritise increasing your vocabulary over learning advanced grammar. In conversation, advanced grammar can often easily be understood through context. This is rarely true of unknown words, unless they happen to include roots or affixes that are already familiar.

How to learn words

Learners typically learn words in three main ways:

- Discovery: Finding or being introduced to words, spending time with the word
- Practice: Reading and listening, seeing the words in context and understanding the meaning of the whole phrase
- Drill: Flashcards and other exercises

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

If you want to remember a word, but aren't going to add it to your flashcards, I recommend you spend a bit of time and mental effort consciously focusing on it. Tell yourself that it's important and that you intend to learn it. Make sure you actually mean it! If you don't feel interested or motivated to know the word, you will find it slipping from your memory more easily.

What words should I learn?

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

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

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



Key tip: Don't learn closely related words together

Although it might seem like a good idea, it's best ****not**** to learn words together if they are related or in any way similar, as this can cause you to confuse them. This includes near synonyms (rely/depend), opposites (fast/slow), words typically recounted together (days of the week, numbers), or even similar-sounding words (delay/relay).



Key tip: Learn numbers

Learning numbers, particularly large ones, can be a surprisingly difficult task, making dates an early challenge for many learners. It helps to spend focused effort learning them through drills. You may find [LangPractice](#) helpful for this.

Word Lists

You may find it helpful to keep a list of those words or phrases 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. This is not mandatory.

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

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

²This isn't a completely free shortcut, as 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.

Mnemonics

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

The most common method is the **keyword method**. This links the word you want to learn to a similar-sounding word in your native language. For example: Imagine you want to learn the French word for *car*: *voiture*. You might note that the word *voiture* sounds like *vulture* in English. You can mentally link the two by imagining a car with a vulture on top of it, or, if you are very imaginative, a car shaped like a vulture. Now, when you want to talk about a car, you'll remember the vulture and that the French word sounds like *vulture*, hence reminding you to say *voiture*. 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](#)

Chapter 8

The Four Skills

In this section we'll be looking at how to improve your acquisition of the four skills.

The four skills are best learned through practice followed by exercises that focus on the skills separately. I recommend you focus on the skills most closely related to your goal. For example, if you want to have conversations, you need to focus on listening and speaking.

8.1 Reading/writing

Orthography

Orthography is the way the letters correspond to the sounds of your language. Languages exist on a continuum, from those with a very high correspondence of letters to sound to those whose pronunciation can be difficult to guess based on spelling. Orthography should be covered by your beginner course. I advise you pay attention to it.

Learning a new script

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

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

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

8.2 Listening

Listening well is mostly comprised of the ability to hear sounds and distinguish and understand words quickly.

Practising listening

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

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

8.3 Speaking

Speaking well is a combination of accurate pronunciation and good knowledge of words and forms. To become good at speaking it helps to develop good listening as well, since it is difficult to produce sounds you cannot distinguish.

Learning pronunciation

Unless you are learning a tonal language, learning good pronunciation is not absolutely essential, especially for a beginner; however, good pronunciation can ease communication a lot. Poor pronunciation learned during the early stages can become ingrained and hard to fix.

Good pronunciation typically does not come naturally to adult learners, so it can be important to pay focused attention. If you want a good accent, I recommend you learn as you start speaking, aiming to get the sounds mostly correct every time you speak.

What follows is a quick guide to get you most of the way. The full guide to learning pronunciation is in [Appendix A: How to Learn Pronunciation](#).

I recommend you use Google or search a community to find a pronunciation guide for your target language. The best guides will explain each sound using diagrams, explanations, or special symbols (called the [IPA](#)) in addition to audio to show you how they sound.¹

Spend focused effort improving those aspects of your language you find difficult. Use a dictionary such as [Forvo](#) or [Wiktionary](#) or any audio input to get a good example to try mimic. It is helpful to practise throughout your study by trying to read texts, flashcards, or anything you encounter aloud.

Remembering words and forms

When first speaking, many learners find themselves struggling to remember the words they need.

There is a difference between your ability to understand words and using them yourself in speech; however, this barrier can be overcome. These two types of knowledge (understanding and producing) link to the same concept; they are different, but not fundamentally so. The simple fact is that producing requires finding the word in your memory without an easy reference, making it harder to do.

The most natural way this gap is bridged is by gradually building greater familiarity with the word over time. Often, learners are only superficially familiar with a word, making it hard to remember. However, with exposure and experience, words eventually gain a certain salience that

¹A common method of many courses, guides, and dictionaries is to give an English approximation for each sound. This is OK to start but is insufficient to achieve accurate pronunciation.

lets them come to mind when needed. Often, the best course of action is to simply be patient and practise.

If a word is particularly important, it can help to practise that word productively. You can do this by practising speaking aloud, writing sentences, or by simply using your flashcards productively.

8.4 Summary of the advice for beginners

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

All your grammar and vocabulary will be acquired through a combination of discover, practice, and drill. Your beginner course will do a lot of the work to introduce you to a lot; however, you will generally need to do a lot of flashcard study and reading and listening to build your knowledge.

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

Focus on learning your language's script if it is different and focus on pronunciation if you want a good accent. For both of these, early effort will pay off in the long-term.

Chapter 9

Key Activities

Now that you hopefully have a good grasp of how to learn a language, we can turn to some great activities to do as you approach the intermediate stage. Although they are best suited for intermediate learners, I'm including them in the beginner section as they can be highly beneficial even for upper-beginner-level learners.

9.1 Drill your language using content

The purpose of drilling with content is use content to focus on a key aspect of your language and develop it with the help of the broader context. This is a core intermediate activity that is optional for beginners. You can find more info on using input [in the appendix](#).

Get a piece of content that you already understand 90–98% of. This will ideally have a written component, such as a text, video with subtitles, or podcast with a transcript. You will then read or listen to your content multiple times (up to ten, even). Repetition is a powerful principle that ensures you remember what you learn. Each time you will read more carefully and try to gain new insight.

The reason you read the content multiple times is that understanding 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.

Here are the key phases:

1. Skim read for broader context—lets you derive meaning from context more easily
2. Brief read—read quickly without looking anything up, try to guess the meaning of key words
3. Deeper read—read again, focusing on those parts that are still unclear to you
4. Lookup—search for the meaning of key words and forms that are preventing you from understanding fully
5. Repeat reading—as many times as necessary to understand the text

Alternate between *lookup* and *repeat reading* as much as you need.

At some point you may narrow down to a component of the language you would like to focus on improving. You can also follow-up by using the resource for a range of activities. Here are some ideas:

- Practise listening to an audio recording

- Drill some key vocabulary with flashcards
- Produce a written summary of the resource
- Read the text aloud
- Send the written summary to a native to be corrected
- Discuss it with a tutor

If by the end you can comfortably understand the content, congratulations! You are now measurably better at your target language.

9.2 Extensive reading

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

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

The key to extensive reading is that you read widely and a lot. Content you use will need to already be 98% understandable to you. Use the [Resources](#) chapter 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. Learners often find books for teens or even pre-teens that they enjoy enough to read. If the book is a translation of one you have already read in your native language, that will help you read a more difficult book without losing track of what is happening. Here are some books that are commonly re-read by learners:

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

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

9.3 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

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

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

of speaking and listening in tandem, it exposes you to native speaker content, exposes you to new forms and vocabulary, and lets you get help and feedback in real time. Many learners report a burst of insight that can come from beginning to speak as their target language turns from memorised rules and phrases into a living language that they can interact with.



Principle: Get feedback on your ability

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

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

When to start speaking

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

How to get conversation practice

The best way to practise speaking is to find a native speaker and start a language exchange, an activity in which you each spend time speaking each other's language. You can do this by organising with people in your real life if you have any native speakers around. If you don't have anybody nearby, the best option is to do an online exchange using Skype or any other internet calling service. You can find people very easily by using a community dedicated to language exchanges. Use the [section in the Resources chapter](#) to find a service that works for you.

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

Building confidence

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

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

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



Key tip: Don't be afraid to make mistakes

Don't shy away from trying things because you are afraid of making mistakes. Mistakes are a natural part of the process of learning and will not necessarily hinder your progress. Conversely, trying to use the language absolutely correctly every time can slow your progress by reducing the amount of practice you get. Most mistakes simply fix themselves over time without correction. As long as you are getting lots of input and basing your language production off that, you will probably be fine. Listen closely next time you are near a young child. They make mistakes all the time, yet all will learn to a native level given enough time. For more information, read [the chapter on mistakes](#).

Chapter 10

Moving to the Intermediate Stage

This chapter marks the end of the advice tailored towards beginners. From here, I provide more frameworks to help intermediate learners choose better study activities and progress more effectively. If you've gotten this far and have yet to begin your journey, **I recommend you stop here and begin studying**. There is nothing here that will change how you should approach your learning as a beginner.

10.1 How your study changes

As you might recall from the paragraph on [CEFR levels](#), the intermediate stage is roughly the point where the learner can function in a conversation with native speakers, even if they need to speak slowly and simply. During this stage, the learner largely ceases to follow a structured syllabus. Learning becomes more self-directed based on your goals.

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

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

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

10.2 Slowing progress

The intermediate stages also mark the point in which you will begin to feel like your progress is slowing down, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the *intermediate plateau*. This is a natural part of your learning, and leads us to the next principle I want to share with you:



Principle: Trust the process

A common learner complaint is that learning seems to slow down at a certain point. This can lead to frustration at an apparent lack of progress. These natural plateaus will occur often in your learning. It is a natural part of learning a language and happens to everyone. Plateaus have more to do with how language learning works than your technique. The best fix is to simply power through it. Continue using input, challenge yourself to improve, and, most importantly, **trust the process**. You will progress, I promise.

There is no point where your learning will appear to pick back up to the pace you experienced as a beginner, though you can continue to tangibly improve with good application of the advice here. To help you through this stage, the next chapter will discuss the kinds of exercises you can do and how to choose between them.

Chapter 11

Choosing What to Study

In this chapter I am aiming to give you a framework to decide what activities to do. You may notice you already do a lot of what is here. The purpose is to help you understand what is happening beneath the hood and use that knowledge to do it better.

11.1 Goals and weaknesses

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

1. Your goals
2. Your weaknesses

Your goals

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



Key tip: Narrow your learning

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

Your weaknesses

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

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

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

What do I need to know?

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

Table 11.1: *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 Numbers
Reading	Orthography Characters (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

Now we will look at the kinds of exercises you can do plus how to think about which ones to choose.

11.2 Direct Practice

It is often best to directly practise the thing you want to get better at. For example, if you want to improve at conversation, then talk with native speakers. If you find your main goal too difficult, you can do similar tasks, such as listening to podcasts or speaking aloud in a mirror, if necessary.

You may often find yourself doing other forms of practice that are not your goal. There can be good reasons for this:

- You may not be able to practise your goal
- You may want some variety in your learning
- You may need something a bit easier in order to improve on your weaknesses—For example, you may read because you are frequently missing grammatical forms in conversation

This type of indirect practice can be useful; however, it is usually slower at helping you achieve your goals. **As much as possible, your practice should be direct.**

Learners often substitute direct practice with a related task when they shouldn't. Those who want to communicate will pass time drilling grammar, vocabulary, or reading news. These tasks have their place, but will not result in progress without a lot of direct practice.

Practise then drill

Earlier in this guide we covered two essential components of a good method: *practice* and *drill*. These often do not sit as separate activities, but in fact should be used in tandem. I want you to keep this in mind when it comes to choosing activities.

Skills gained during drills do not easily transfer to other situations. Just because you spend lots of time drilling grammar, that does not mean you will find yourself effortlessly employing it when you next speak. This gives rise to the next principle:



Principle: Practise then drill

In order to improve, it is best to practise then drill the weaknesses you identify are holding you back. Follow up by attempting to practise your goal again, consciously employing the new knowledge you have gained from your drills.

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. This is why basic workbook grammar exercises are not a recommended drill. You'll get very good at doing tests, but what portion of that will easily transfer to your speaking? Not so much.

Balance drill and practice. Both will help you improve, but each has strengths and weaknesses that play off each other. Excessive study without practice will not translate into skills that help you achieve your goals. Excessive practice without study could cause you to develop fossilised errors (this often occurs with people who speak a lot) or cause your rate of improvement to stagnate.



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.

11.3 Language learning activities

I hope that by now you have a good understanding of what a good exercise looks like for you. In this section we will look at some possible activities for you to do. While you are getting ideas, I want you to keep in mind the principle *Practise then drill*. Find activities that closely simulate your goal, then choose drills that address your weaknesses.

All activities fall into one of three categories:

1. **Meaning-focused**
2. **Language-focused**
3. **Fluency-focused**

Each falls into a niche that helps you apprehend your language.

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

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

Meaning-focused activities

Large amounts of natural language are required to learn a language, so the learner should be seeking out and engaging with large amounts of input. The goal is simply to expose yourself to as much of the language as possible and generally understand what is happening. It will be helpful to become comfortable with an incomplete understanding of what you read or hear.

Table 11.2: *Meaning-focused activities*

Activity	Description
Extensive reading	Already mentioned earlier. 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 earlier. Talking and listening to native speakers in real conversation is highly beneficial.
Reading while listening	Helps you get used to sounds while reading, as well as improving comprehension over simply listening.
Listening to audio	This works like extensive and narrow reading, but by listening to podcasts or radio. This can be 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

This is when you utilise some smaller piece of content to attempt focused improvement at a specific component or skill, such as a grammar concept, vocabulary, natural phrases, or aural comprehension. This is the closest to a typical desk study session. Resources used for language-focused learning are often more difficult than those you would use for meaning-focused learning.

Table 11.3: *Language-focused activities*

Activity	Description
Intensive reading	Drilling with content. This means carefully reading a specific text with the objective of learning a new piece of language. Your goal is to understand the text by repeatedly reading it and consciously choosing what you will focus on.
Memorising sentences or words using flashcards	This technique is well covered in 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

These are exercises aimed at helping you improve the speed and ease at which you can use language you already know, focusing on the four skills. If you use content, you will generally use it for some specific component and focus only on that. Typical fluency-focused activities involve pronunciation.

Table 11.4: *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.

**Key tip: Make sure you get some variety**

Try to do study involving at least one activity from each of the three categories. In addition, it will help to include 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.

Chapter 12

Mistakes

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

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

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

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

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

There are two general sources of errors:

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

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

12.1 Fossilisation

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

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

The good news is that doing things to avoid fossilisation is also generally good language learning

technique. Here is how you can mitigate the risk of developing fossilised errors and mistakes:

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

Chapter 13

The Final Chapter

13.1 Summary

Here are the key ideas that underpin your learning:

1. Work towards your goals
2. Spend as much time as you can with your language
3. Use the language in order to learn it
4. Trust the process

Here are some key ideas you should use with your method:

Progress through your course. This will structure your learning. Make sure you follow others' recommendations but prioritise what you enjoy using. 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.

Drill and reinforce your knowledge. This allows you to develop aspects of your language you might be neglecting.

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.

Drill using content. This lets you learn any aspect of your language in a way that lets you see it in use.

Practise your language to integrate everything you have learned together.

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. Reading a book is a great way to get input for learners of all levels.

Speak and write to help solidify your understanding. Find a conversation partner and start speaking when you feel comfortable.

The latter parts will have given you lots more activities to try and principles to integrate into your learning. Choose what you study based on your goals and weaknesses. You can choose activities that are meaning-focused, language-focused, or fluency-focused. Do a range of study activities to get some variety.

Practise then drill. Practice will help you combine your skills together and identify weaknesses.

Drill will help you focus on these weaknesses to improve your performance.

Mistakes are a common feature of language learning. Avoid building fossilised mistakes and errors by using the language in context and getting feedback on your output.

13.2 Conclusion

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

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

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

Thank you for reading!

Appendix A

How to Learn Pronunciation

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

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

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

A.1 What to learn

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

Sound inventory: Every language has a set of distinct consonants and vowels. These sounds can be very different from English (such as tones and click consonants) or only slightly different.

Oral posture: This is the way native speakers tend to hold the muscles in their mouth.

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

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

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

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

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

can differ between languages.

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

The next sections will elaborate on some of these aspects.

Sound inventory

The difficulty with learning new sounds is understanding precisely how to make them. If you would like to master the pronunciation of your language, it helps a lot to learn some of the terminology around sounds and parts of the mouth.

Your best tool for learning the sounds of your language is the [International Phonetic Alphabet](#) (IPA). 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. By googling any IPA symbol, you can find the Wikipedia article describing it, which has a sound file to help you. [Here](#) is the Wikipedia entry for the phonology of English to help you.

Next I will provide you with some resources to understand the fundamentals of consonants and vowels. It can be very easy to think you are producing something correctly. However, careful study of the sounds of your language can reveal differences you were not previously aware of.

The [Encyclopedia Britannica entry on phonetics](#) will be a useful reference later on.

Vowels

The IPA also includes a [vowel chart](#), which is very useful for understanding how different vowels are formed. [Here](#) is a great video analysing English accents that also serves as an interesting introduction to the vowel chart.

Consonants

Consonants have three fundamental aspects. Here they are with links to a series that describes them:

- [Place of articulation](#)
- [Manner of articulation](#)
- [Voicing](#)

Oral posture

Oral posture is one of the more difficult concepts to grasp, but understanding it can provide a huge boost to your pronunciation. You can think of oral posture as the natural resting place, or “home base” of the mouth of a native speaker. Every sound is produced from this base.

You can learn from this home base by adjusting the posture of your own mouth when you are speaking. This should help you achieve more accurate pronunciation.

Pronunciation guides rarely talk about oral posture, so the best way to learn it is often by paying careful attention when watching a video of a native speaker. The best time to spot this is often by watching the mouth of the speaker when they pause between phrases, or by paying

attention to how they sound when they make the equivalent of our word for *uhhh*. [Here](#) is a video of an accent trainer describing French that may help you understand the concept.

Here are some aspects to look out for:

- Lips
 - Lip corners
 - Pursing
- Cheeks
 - Tensing or relaxation
 - Location of tensing (can be the whole cheek or isolated parts)
- Tongue
 - Bunching up in the back of the mouth
 - Flattening
 - Arching or cupping
 - Bracing (often against upper teeth)
- Jaw
 - Height
 - Retraction or protrusion
- The positioning of the velum
- The width of the pharynx

Difficult sound clusters

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

Stress

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

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

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

A.2 How to practise pronunciation

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

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

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

I recommend you plan out some sessions where you focus on pronunciation early on, ideally when you first start speaking. To do this, you can use the suggested exercises below.

Exercises

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

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

Table A.1: Pronunciation activities

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

Overcoming the mental hurdle

One of the biggest hurdles to enabling adult learners to speak with a good accent is purely psychological. That is, we are afraid of sounding silly when we speak. The result is we default to

the way that sounds the least silly to us—the sounds of our native language. It is important to understand that good pronunciation will initially feel very weird to you.

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

Appendix B

The Core Resources

B.1 Further advice on flashcards

Should I use pictures instead of words?

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

Learning through flashcards

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

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

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

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

B.2 Further Advice on Using Content

Input is essential for four main reasons:

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

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



Key tip: Use context to help you learn

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

Your level +1 in your content

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

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

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

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

Appendix C

Further Advice on Learning Vocabulary

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

C.1 Multi-word phrases

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

C.2 Focus on words that don't directly translate

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

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

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

C.3 Logical connections help you learn words

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

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

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

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

Appendix D

How the Brain Learns

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

D.1 A growth mindset

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

D.2 Be curious

The best way to learn something is when there is clear 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.

D.3 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.

There are several ways you can reduce this mental hurdle:

- **Context**—Use phrases and content to link words to others, showing you how they are used in context
- **Logical connections**—Words often share roots or affixes in common with other words you know which you can use as prompt to help you remember
- **Mnemonics**—Read the [section on mnemonics](#) for useful techniques to create other logical connections

- **Personal connection**—Try to create a connection to the word so that it becomes personally meaningful to you
- **Curiosity**—Stay curious and interested in the words and forms you encounter

D.4 Top-down and bottom-up processing

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

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

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

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

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

D.5 Chunks

Which ordering of letters do you think is easier to memorise: “orhezo 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 you are already familiar with the constituent parts. You’ve already memorised the correct spelling of each word and their order fits comfortably in the patterns of language you find intuitive (it is grammatical).

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

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

Once you learn something, it becomes a new chunk to help provide context for learning new

concepts.

Building new chunks is difficult and takes focused effort. The core insight of this idea 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.

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

D.6 Difficulty + successful recall

When you encounter something that you’ve learned about before but haven’t fully absorbed, the general stages are as follows:

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

Your brain learns optimally when you encounter something, **expend mental effort**, and eventually succeed. To ensure your mental effort results in learning, aim for just the right amount of difficulty—not too difficult that something presents an insurmountable barrier, but not so easy that you don’t learn anything new. This is the principle [Your level +1](#).

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 mostly comprehensible, all the known words and forms surrounding something new provides useful context that reduces the barrier to understanding and enables optimal learning.

Avoid doing activities that are too much of a struggle until you are able to do slightly easier ones. If you constantly find yourself struggling without understanding, you need to find an easier activity.

Often you will struggle to recall the meaning of a word or form and will be forced to look it up. This is perfectly natural and very common. While re-looking things up helps learning, it is not optimal. Try to find ways to prompt yourself to remember the answer.

D.7 Active recall

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

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

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

D.8 Habit

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

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

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

Appendix E

Common Questions

E.1 Can I learn two languages at once?

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

E.2 Can I learn like a child?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

E.4 How important are grammar lessons?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix F

The Principles

F.1 Principles of approach

- [Build a base and work up](#)—start with simpler concepts first then build up from there
- [Work towards your goals](#)—practice whatever tasks you are learning the language for
- [Keep up your motivation](#)—find ways to stay interested in the language
- [Spend as much time as you can with your language](#)—Time is the key determiner of how fast you learn
- [Trust the process](#)—learning can be a slow process, so sometimes you need to trust that you will progress with time
- [80 percent of your results come from 20 percent of your study](#)—find the most effective activities and biggest weaknesses and focus on them
- [Push yourself](#)—constantly challenge yourself by moving on to harder resources

F.2 Principles of learning

- [Use the language in order to learn it](#)—listen and read as much as possible, you will learn the language when you use it, not when you learn about it
- [Repetition](#)—you need to encounter something a lot before you learn it
- [Engage your memory](#)—try to actively recall the meaning of words and forms before you look them up
- [Noticing](#)—Noticing forms in your content is a powerful way to learn
- [Don't try to learn things perfectly the first time you encounter them](#)—you need to see the language in context a lot before it will stick in your mind

F.3 Principles of practice

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

Appendix G

Recommended Reading

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

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

G.1 Podcasts

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

Appendix H

Choosing a Language

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

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

languages out of personal interest tend to be more successful than those who merely want to learn a language and simply pick the easiest. This is because the former has more motivation. Rather than thinking of difficulty, it is better to think in terms of the number of hours with the language it might take to reach a certain level. This is because languages you are bored by will be hard for you to stick with. You won't enjoy the necessary hours of exposure. On the other hand, learning a language you love can be a lot of fun, even if it takes a bit longer.

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

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

H.1 Motivation

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

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



Key tip: Spend some time trying them out

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