

# Not-so-fast language learning.

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## A story how I have learned seven languages. A story in 5 parts.

The last couple of years my language skills improved dramatically. Words in a new language combine together like notes in a symphony, i enjoy hearing and speaking them. If I don't know any word my brain quickly makes connections, find analogies between the languages that I know and the one I am learning and comes up with an approximate meaning for it. I watch TV shows, joke with friends and improve my language skills every day.

So what is the secret, you may ask. Until recently I didn't know the answer, but right now I am starting to understand some of the underlying principles and tricks that help me turn the tedious exercise of language learning into a joyful experience. Today I will share my story and the first set of principles and tricks. In one of my next posts, I will post a more comprehensive summary of the methods. Let me start with my story.

### Part 1: Childhood.

Until I came to Canada, I was an average Joe Vasili in language learning. I was born in Uzbekistan to a Russian speaking family 🇷🇺. My dad is third generation Greek 🇬🇷, and my mom is Tatar (one of the small nationalities living with Russians since the 15th century). We spoke Russian at home, but the streets were full of Uzbek 🇺🇿 kids, and I had to learn to talk Uzbek to them. My elementary English was ok. I knew the basic words like "a table, a pen" and could sing a song about "Old McDonald who has a farm." 🐶👨🌾😊 My mom would hire a tutor to teach me and force me to learn ten new words a day. For some reason, it didn't click, and I couldn't speak it at all. A few times we traveled to Greece, where I stayed for two months. In these trips, I tried to learn Greek and again couldn't go beyond "a table, a pen" level.

This was my life before I turned 11 and before we moved to Chelyabinsk, Russia. In Russia I went to, naturally, Russian school with no one speaking Uzbek and my Uzbek become quickly forgotten, due to the lack of practice. English in my school was very inefficient, I had straight A+ and had an impression that I know the language. I couldn't be more wrong as we would see very soon when I will move to my new high school.

After a lot of efforts, I passed the test and managed to get into the best school in the city for my high school years. The school principal, a math teacher himself, would run the selection process himself. He didn't care about someone's knowledge but tested his/her logical reasoning and. It was my third attempt, and I finally passed. I felt like; he got tired of me showing up every year - so he gave up and said: "I think, you could be coachable."

So I ended up in a school with the best Math and Physics talent in town. Some students were even the best in the World and would win several World Olympiads. To say that my marks took a steep downturn, was an understatement. I had been a straight an A+ student. I became a C- person and had to struggle to even stay on that level. Needless to say, that even my English skills turned out to be pathetic. I had four weeks with straight Ds.

As cliché as it sounds, for all the talent I lacked, I had to compensate for with my hard work. To the dismay of my English teacher, I told her, that besides all other subjects I would write a state exam for the English language. After a shock period, she decided to organize a language learning club to prepare students for the state exam. It was a no-nonsense preparation. We learned basic grammar, slowly going from easy exercises to the hard ones. One thing, however, was different; she would ask me to learn pieces of text by heart. Advice that I would carry to this day. She would tell me a story about a spy in Russia, in a spy school who was failing his language tests. She said that at those times, failing a test may be very critical and can help you get a permanent "vacation" in Siberia. To improve his marks and his knowledge, an old professor suggested the aspiring spy learn pieces of texts by heart. Very soon the guy became one of the best language speakers in the academy and aced the tests.

Instead of remembering separate words without any context - Learning a dialogue or text makes us think harder, find analogies, and store information more efficiently. It helped a great deal in learning the grammar and, in general, improved my memory and concentration. After a year of these intense language exercises, I became a slightly-better-than-average Joe Vasilii ... until my last year in undergrad.

## **Part 2: Undergraduate in Moscow**

During the first years of my undergraduate, I didn't have a privilege of having individual language sessions, but we had good teachers, who would steadily improve our English skills. In the last year of my undergrad, we had finished our English curriculum and needed to choose any other language to learn. Most of the people picked Spanish for being the easiest one; some were charmed with the beauty of French, I decided to learn German, and I don't remember why. I had to start from square zero.

German is a weird language with lots of articles and conjugations. They have definite articles which change depending on whether it is masculine, feminine, neutral, in the accusative or genitive tense. So the articles "das, den, der, die ..." you would translate in English, ironically, as "the, the, the, the, the." Russian didn't have any analogs of articles, so learning them was an extremely challenging and cumbersome exercise, and I spent the good first half of the year dealing with them. This time could be summarized with the old saying: "life is too short to learn German." Then came the second half of the year and something clicked.

I have realized that the way I learn the language is fundamentally wrong. The purpose of the language is that a person A can communicate with person B or a group X. When we speak, we don't care about the grammar per se. We don't care if I have been using Past Participle Continuous. We care only about the clarity of the communication. If I can express everything I need to say and the person whom I am speaking to understands everything - that is good enough.

So I decided I stop bothering to learn any hard grammar like Past Participle until I am fluent with the Present tense. Some of my marks went down, but that wasn't for long. I also discovered the best method to master the present Tense called "dynamic learning." The point of dynamic learning approach is that you have to use and learn the language dynamically while using it like in the real world. Let me give you an example. Try to memorize the following words: apple, I, eat, big, a tasty, like. Kind of makes you think hard, doesn't it? Now try to put these words in a sentence and learn the words after that: "I like to eat a big, tasty apple." Super easy, isn't it? Using the second method, you learn the language not as a set of random words, but as a connected structure. This is the essence of the dynamic learning: you are not just learning, but you are dynamically exercising the language (conveying your message to your partner). Now, the thing about the dynamic learning is that you have to spend a lot of time at this stage and repeat these sentences until it becomes the second nature.

After I was done with simple sentences, I took a step further. I started constructing dialogues with questions and statements in the present tense. Again, the secret here is that simplicity saves. Don't bother learning anything complicated. Learn the basic must-learn words like "do, make, have, want, like" and expand from there. Following my high school method of memorizing texts, I learned and practiced these dialogues until they became my second nature. I remember lots of them to this day.

Here is the English version of dialogue that I would learn:

-I like an apple

-He likes an apple

Then I went back and learned how to ask questions:

-I like an apple. Do you like an apple?

-Yes, I do.

After doing dynamic learning exercise million times with the simple verbs, with different verbs, articles and nouns I thought it is a time to create more context with new words.

I like an apple. Do you like an apple?

Yes, I like an apple, but I don't see any apples. Do you have an apple?

Yes, I do have an apple. Do you want an apple?

Everything I learn, I would put in the form of a dialogue and learn by heart. Sometimes, our textbooks would have dialogues, and I would learn them instead. Then the magic happened. Remember, when I said that my marks took a downfall? Well, it all changed. I had a method that could help me crack any test in a blink of an eye. Every time we had a test, and I needed to conjugate something, for example, in an Accusative tense I wouldn't remember the actual ending for that would be, but I would see in my mind a piece of paper with the dialogue where the noun was put in the Accusative tense. Instantaneously, a connection clicks in my mind, and I come up with the right answer. My exams were defenseless against a mental trick like this. After some time,

I would use these words so much that I wouldn't even bother remembering the dialogues because it all will be fresh in my mind.

Unfortunately, my German learning experience wasn't the best. The next important part of learning (arguably the most important) is finding native speakers, speaking to them and using your skills. Alas, I wasn't immersed in the environment with lots of German speakers, so my German didn't become super fluent at that time. In my next post, I will tell rest of my language learning journey. Unlike learning German in Moscow, when I was learning Farsi and Spanish in Vancouver I had plenty of people to talk to - which improved my skills dramatically.

**In summary here are the tricks that I have discusses in this article:**

- 1) If you have a choice to which language to learn start with a one in which you will be immersed.*
- 2) Keep it as simple as you can. No need to learn past tense before you master the present. In the first months no need to learn anything but the Simple tense.*
- 3) Use dynamic learning. Learn the language while practicing. Don't learn separate random words; our brains are terrible at memorizing unconnected pieces of information. Try to combine the words you learn in sentences or even dialogues and learn them.*
- 4) Enjoy the language as music and enjoy learning it. This is the only way. If you don't get a little high by speaking the language while learning - there is no point in studying it.*