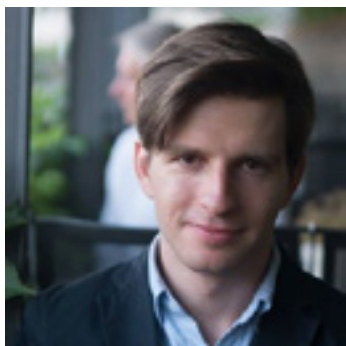


13 ways to learn languages more effectively

Philip Seifi



About the author



Philip Seifi is a nomad entrepreneur, Co-Founder & CEO of **EduLift**—an Oxford-based startup behind a series of award-winning language learning websites and applications. He speaks seven languages and is now learning his eighth.

He has tried every language learning method out there—from old school paper textbooks, through private tutors, to fancy science-based retention techniques—and is now sharing his best self-teaching tips so that you can spend less time learning how to learn, and more time getting fluent.

1. Are you too old to learn a language?

WHEN CONSIDERING WHETHER TO LEARN ANOTHER LANGUAGE, MANY people begin to look for excuses not to, and the most common by far is that they are “too old” to learn a language. What makes this excuse especially ridiculous is that you hear it from kids in their early teens as often as from disheartened midlifers.

The truth is: whether you’re 10 or 90, it’s never too late to learn a language! Not only that, but with the right approach, your age will have little to no impact on how fast you learn.

Why adults learn faster than kids

Sure, many studies have concluded that children learn languages faster than adults, yet there’s one major “but” that people seem to forget when citing these studies—they all begin with the assumption that the child and the adult learn language the same way!

This is akin to comparing a child and an adult riding a bike with training wheels. There’s no doubt that adults and children work and think differently, and these studies also prove that you should change the way you learn over time due to changes in your skills and resources.

When people say that babies learn faster than adults, they forget

that it takes babies many years to reach a conversational level, something that motivated adult learners achieve in mere months. Millions of kids who've been learning a second language throughout their school years and still cannot speak it are yet another proof that it's about the way you learn the language, not about how old you are.

You're different

All it takes for an adult to effectively learn a language is to stop learning like a child, and to use the years of experience, superior analytical skills, and knowledge of other languages to your advantage!

Take a moment to think about how many mistakes the average 5-, 10-, or even 15-year-old will routinely make in their first language. Their accent may be native level and their vocabulary may include a number of words that yours doesn't, but it would be a stretch to say these children are fully "fluent."

So, begin to approach language learning like the mature, intelligent, fluent adult that you are! Forget silly immersion techniques or an outright refusal to use English to unlock your second language. Study hard, study smart and accept that you're no longer six months old—and be grateful for it!

2. Get help from native speakers

YOU MIGHT FEEL FRUSTRATED BY MAKING THE SAME MISTAKES OVER AND over, but that's a fact of life, and you'll never improve unless you move on and vow to improve. Swallow your pride!

Now the problem is: many native speakers feel awkward about correcting learners because they might have had a bad experience when they corrected someone who wasn't looking for help, or they might simply want to avoid discouraging you.

How can you make a helpful, indispensable connection with a native speaker?

1. Make it clear you want their help

Let them know that you want and need their help. This might not be enough to free them to correct you at every step, but it's a good start. You can also explain your motivations for learning their language; this will increase their empathy and interest in assisting you.

2. Show appreciation for their help regularly

You might think that you honestly enjoy being corrected every minute, but in that split second after your mistake is pointed out, your face probably betrays your disappointment. You might even pause to think over

what went wrong. This can embarrass your collocutors, but the situation will be greatly alleviated if you thank them each time they correct you.

3. Create additional incentives

If you're with close friends, try to think of a fun incentive for them to correct you! Buy them a beer if they correct you a certain number of times, carry a pack of candy to give away for each corrected mistake. When you make it fun, it distracts them from thinking it's awkward or wrong to point out your errors!

4. Stick to the language

You'll soon notice that many of the people that cling to you as soon as you enter a bar in downtown Tokyo or a nightclub in Moscow are only interested in you as a source of free English lessons. Remember that language practice is probably one of the reasons you're there, so stick to the language you're learning! The natives won't think it's weird that you're speaking to them in their native tongue—think about the reverse situation when a foreigner visits your country: you'd think it's normal to speak your own language.

Thus, you can make it clear that you have no intention of switching to English, and even if the other person refuses to play along, continue to speak to him/her in their native tongue. You might not improve your listening skills, but speaking to a native will still be of great benefit. If you briefly point out their mistakes in English, they will probably be glad to correct you in return.

3. The secret art of shadowing

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, WE DISCUSSED GETTING HELP FROM NATIVE speakers. But what about times when you're alone, with no natives in sight? This time, we'll look at a more intricate technique, especially useful for periods when you have the time and motivation to learn in an intensive manner.

The shadowing how-to

Shadowing is an advanced learning technique where you listen to an audio recording in your target language, and then speak it aloud at the same time as the native speaker. It can be a scene from a radio play, short from a film, podcast, or even a poem. The important criterion is that it's a challenging text in a piece of media designed for natives.

The basic concept is as follows:

- Listen to the text once. If you don't have even a general idea of what's going on, it might be best to choose an easier topic.
- Listen to the text a few more times until you are confident that whatever you still don't understand, you won't be able to figure out from context and subsequent listening.
- Listen to the text while reading a transcript and look up any

words you're not sure about

- Listen to the text and repeat with minimal delay. Repeat until you can read it confidently at the same speed as the recording, then do it once more and move on to the next track.

Before you move on to the next text, you should understand every word and sentence, and know the text by heart. If you can't recite most of the text while in the shower later, you haven't repeated it enough.

Note that you shouldn't look up vocabulary or grammar until you have repeated the text several times. You might only barely understand the content the first time, but if the text is the right level, you should figure out the meaning of many, if not most, words and sentences after hearing it several times.

Speak loudly and clearly. If you're not too self-conscious, you can take a break from sitting in front of the computer and have a walk in the park. The ideal content is about one page long, at natural speed, on engaging topics with no artificial pauses. A great place to start is the Assimil audio CD, though graded readers are also a good choice.

4. Learn by sharing what you've learned

ONE ASPECT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING THAT IS SORELY UNDERESTIMATED by students is networking and communicating with people who are not necessarily learning the language along with you. Sharing your goals will make you accountable to others, which can motivate you to meet your targets. In addition, teaching others what you've learned is the best way to cement the knowledge you've gained!

Share your goals and progress

It is very important to share your progress with friends and family. This will motivate you and give you another reason not to stop learning.

Sharing with your relatives is great, but to maximize this strategy, make your commitments as public as possible. Research suggests that public commitments are a powerful tool, and they help fight our laziness on a subconscious level.

First, take a piece of paper, jot down the reason why you're learning the language, and pin it onto your wall. Some adventurous people go as far as printing a poster and displaying it in their windows. You can also start a blog and share your achievements on social networks. We strongly encourage you to create a learning journal online, where you

write all that you have learned and how you feel about it. Soon, you will have people following you and commenting on your progress!

Teach others, explain what you're learning

As we know, repetition is a key to knowledge, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the best way to learn a language is to teach the language.

While the word “teacher” is often associated with vast knowledge of a particular subject, you can in fact begin teaching on the very first day you start learning a language. The key is to find an interested listener whose knowledge of the target language is barely below yours. First language class? Don't be shy; greet your grandmother in the language you're learning the next time you speak to her! Learn a new proverb? Explain its meaning to your Facebook friends.

What you teach doesn't have to be practical; highlighting interesting features of the language, with cultural tidbits added, can also be beneficial.

Every time you transfer your knowledge to someone else, you will better understand the information yourself, and it will be cemented into your memory. In addition, figuring out how to best explain a concept means that you're likely to discover hidden nuances and quirks that you wouldn't otherwise realize.

Don't worry about not having teaching experience! If you are truly interested in the language that you're learning, your passion will engage others. Once you've learned how to count in a foreign language, there is nothing stopping you from teaching others how to do so too.

5. Good learners copy...

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO PRACTICE THE LANGUAGE you're learning is to use it every day, and if you don't live in the country where the language is spoken, this might mean writing every day.

When it comes to actual writing, however, many a student gives up because of three "lacks": time, feedback, or ideas. The good news is that all three of these are easily overcome with the tips below.

Copy, copy, copy

Copying is bad if you are cheating on a test, but in language learning, simple replication has many benefits. An easy way to do this is to open a book at your level in the target language, and begin copying it word for word, chapter by chapter!

Of course, it will be more interesting if you understand what's going on in the story, but try not to spend time looking up vocabulary and grammar. In fact, a good choice of book might be one you've already read, so that you can progress at a rapid pace.

It might seem boring at first, but after you get used to it, copying just a few pages a day will do wonders for your reading and writing

speed. It will also implant hundreds of set constructions and expressions in your mind without you even being aware of it.

Though this is a written exercise, it will be quite helpful the next time you engage in a live conversation. Native speakers don't just combine words—rather, they speak in phrases that are modified to fit the situation.

6. Learn in under 140 characters

PART OF THE BEAUTY OF TWITTER IS NOT ONLY THAT IT APPEALS TO PEOPLE with a short attention span, but that it forces those who Tweet to condense what they want to express.

As you learn a new language, Tweets can be a great, bite-sized way to test your comprehension and your ability to write in a foreign language.

Follow a person or two on Twitter, hopefully not an elderly academic or a lawyer. Try a celebrity and someone your age for starters. Most celebs will Tweet in a way that their very large audience can readily understand. When you follow someone your own age, you get a good feel for relevant and practical vocabulary.

You also should Tweet in the language you're learning, to practice your written expression and verify your usage as correct. Tweet and follow a few people every day. This short daily exercise of writing and reading comprehension will help you immeasurably *and* be fun, especially if you are a visual learner, which many of us are.

Tweet to fluency!

7. No teacher, no feedback?

IT'S ONE THING TO WRITE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND COPY TEXTBOOKS or other writings. It's quite another to write and have your work immediately corrected.

If you write consistently and make the same error again and again, if it is not corrected early in the process, you might be saddled with a weak spot for years to come. Don't develop these bad habits, or perhaps making a character incorrectly or using the wrong one in the wrong place.

[Here is a fantastic resource](#), Lang-8, to have your writings corrected for free by native speakers. In other words, this site will give you a valuable component of the classroom experience—teacher feedback—without you having to be in a physical classroom.

8. It's behaviour, stupid

DO YOU KNOW WHAT NATIVE SPEAKERS LOOK AT TO DETERMINE A PERSON'S fluency in their language? It's not proper grammar or even pronunciation—it's the behavior of the speaker that demonstrates his or her command in the language.

In other words, native speakers are watching your gestures, intonation, courtesies and other behavioral factors to size you up. They are accustomed to foreigners attempting to learn their language, and they are a very observant people. That is precisely why the best language learning programs teach you to mimic native speakers in every way, from voice modulation to the movement of your mouth and head.

We've all known the language learner who has made all As in the classroom and has excellent pronunciation, yet is instantly identified as a foreigner no matter how hard they try to fit in.

On the other hand, it is quite possible for a relative beginner to be mistaken for a native if they speak and behave like the locals. Pronunciation is not heeded (might be from a different region), and neither is grammar (could be a different form where they're from).

No, what matters most in the end is the ease and confidence with which the speaker behaves, while doing a pitch-perfect imitation of a

native speaker. Need proof? Hang around a child. You will hear someone who knows precisely how to speak long before they learn proper grammar and memorize a large vocabulary.

It really is behavior, stupid, so mind your manners too! The importance of good manners cannot possibly be overestimated.

9. The lazy student's way to learn vocab

ONE THING WE LOVE ABOUT LEARNING NEW LANGUAGES IS HOW EASY it is to integrate learning into your day-to-day life. In other words, you can study a difficult subject while consuming entertainment, enjoying a good meal, hanging out with friends, and even while learning something else at the same time.

One lazy learning tip we'd like to share is the creative use of post-it notes to learn vocabulary. We're sure that many of you have heard of or even used this technique already, but we'll also cover a few advanced uses that you might not have thought of before.

Post-it 101

In case you've never tried this, let's start with the basics! Post-it notes are the small, paper rectangles with a sticky top. How can they help you learn a language?

For starters, you can label all the furniture, electronics, food, and other stuff around your house or apartment. The next time you watch TV, open the fridge, or look at the clock, you will read the note attached to it.

Beyond nouns

Many students introduced to this method stop using post-it notes as soon as they learn the names of the objects in their residence. If you think outside the box, however, you'll quickly find out that this technique can easily be used for so much more.

After nouns, consider adding adjectives and other qualifiers. For example, add "white" to the label on the fridge, "wall" to the clock, and "my" to your notebook. Next, consider using entire phrases, such as "My favorite tea cup" or questions associated with the objects, such as "What time is it?"

There is almost no limit to what you can learn via post-it notes. For example, when it comes to more abstract concepts and grammar points, simply stick them on a note attached to the mirror or the bathroom door, and you'll memorize them in no time.

Having a problem remembering the right sentence order or verb ending? Stick parts of words and sentences onto magnets and rearrange them on your fridge. Learning Japanese kanji readings? Write the word in kanji on the front side, and the reading on the back.

Other thoughts

The beauty of this technique is that it is almost infinitely expandable, it requires little effort, and it works exceptionally well even if you're learning several languages simultaneously. If your notes are getting too confusing, you can use several colors to differentiate the languages. The key is to read or answer the labels every time you use or even just look at an object. Give it time, and you're bound to remember many of them.

10. Go out and help a tourist

YOU WILL NEED TO OVERCOME YOUR INTROVERTED TENDENCIES IF YOU are geared that way, but you will discover the warm feeling from both helping someone and demonstrating tangible progress in your target language as you help a tourist.

When you see tourists in any number of poses for which they are famous: squinting at street signs, peering at bus stop schedules, turning maps around and around and around—don't just stand there! Help them out. You will find many golden opportunities to practise your greetings, give directions and other chit-chat that could lead to a new friendship.

At the same time, you will earn goodwill credits for your country and act the part of the Good Samaritan as you reinforce language that you've learned by assisting a tourist who would otherwise miss a bus, be locked out of a museum, or walk in the wrong direction for several kilometers.

Keep your eyes open for the human species known as “mystified tourist” and help them whenever possible. Someday, that tourist will be you!

11. Forget words, learn sentences!

PEOPLE DON'T SPEAK IN WORDS ALONE UNLESS THEY ARE IN HURRY OR very angry. That's why learning from sentences instead of individual words or characters will let you learn more efficiently. Mastering sentences will force you to learn in a balanced manner, and it will motivate you as the additional context makes the process more interesting and many of the sentences are readily usable.

What's good about sentences is that you not only learn new words, but you also understand their nuance and how to use them in context. That's critically important, because you don't want to tell a person who has just lost her purse, "That's great! I'm fine too."

As you have no time to waste, it's probably best to use a precompiled sentence deck shared by other users, but you are welcome to supplement that with additional sentences you come across elsewhere. Build a collection that resonates with your interests and the way you speak your native language.

On a related note, the more personal and emotional the sentences, the easier they'll be to remember, so make sure to venture beyond simple "the book is on the shelf" declarations if you can.

12. Think minutes, not years

LANGUAGE LEARNING IS A LIFELONG PROCESS; THAT IS TRUE, BUT IT MUST be broken down into tiny parts and small advances. Nearly every culture in the world has a proverb about this. We like the West African saying that “Little by little, the bird builds its nest.”

As you build a comfy nest where you speak the language well, do it little by little. Think in time measures such as minutes, not years. Don’t get so discouraged about how far you are from native fluency that you neglect to put in your five minutes of work today.

Give the few minutes you have today to master a small concept, sentence, greeting or conversation. Tomorrow, you might have more time to work on larger goals.

Aim for putting in at least several minutes each day to learning the language in an enjoyable way, not memorizing 200 words at a time. Slow and steady wins the race, another proverb says. It’s best to learn in small pieces daily rather than in huge chunks once per week or month.

13. Couchsurfing your way to fluency

HERE'S A REMINDER THAT YOU PROBABLY DON'T NEED: YOU'RE NOT GOING to make huge strides in learning a language by staying in a five-star hotel in Tokyo. Oh, the beds will be soft and the lobby will be great for people watching as you see tourists and other visitors from all over the world. But, to cement your gains in language learning, you need to plant yourself on a couch.

Thankfully, the Internet makes this much more feasible as you look into [Couchsurfing](#), couch-hosting, home stays and log onto [Airbnb](#). As you get into the homes of locals and sleep on their bed or futon for a fraction of a hotel bill, you will have an invaluable chance to make rapid progress, learn the culture and hopefully commence long-term friendships that could equate to eventual fluency for you.

So, the choice is yours: exchange a few pleasantries with the front desk personnel at the hotel as they continue to try and shift to your language to practice their skills, or stay somewhere that will be full of people eager to help you learn. All kinds of phrases and vocabulary that you have previously studied will come alive as you hear native speakers say, "Get up! Get off the couch! It's time to get moving" each morning. That beats a wakeup call in your native tongue hands down.

Enjoyed this ebook?

Give LinguaLift a try

Study from the comfort of your browser,
Delight friends & clients in their mother tongue

[Start learning now](#)

Follow us for more learning tips



Read more on our blog

[Check it out](#)