SECOND EDITION

HOW TO LEARN
A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE WITH TIPS AND RESOURCES

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JEFF BLUM

How to Learn a Language

A Practical Guide with Tips and Resources

Jeff Blum

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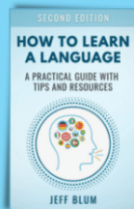
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Preface

Congratulations! You've decided to learn a new language and soon you will enjoy the benefits of speaking more than one language. Still, studying and learning can be a daunting process. Should you self-study? Take a course? Buy a software program? Hire a private tutor? What kinds of learning systems are available and which might be right for you? How about the myriad of online resources available? And where should you begin? Grammar? Vocabulary? Listening? Reading and Writing? By the way, how long will all this effort take, anyway? Answering these questions is my goal with this short but thorough book. In addition, I believe I have compiled the best collection of online language resources to be found in one location; the small investment of time you make in reading what follows will pay great dividends as a faster, more robust language learning experience.

Introduction

After three years of traveling in Latin America, I achieved a lower intermediate level of Portuguese and an advanced level of Spanish. I also studied Japanese for some years and reached an intermediate level in that language and I am at about the same level with Thai.

So, with no true multilingual fluency, I can't claim any special expertise, but my interest in achieving fluency leads me to think about and research how to best learn a language. What follows is an attempt to clarify and organize my own thoughts about mastering a language while also presenting the results of extensive online research into the systems and techniques advocated by various language learning experts and sites. You will also find a comprehensive set of resources to aid you with whatever approach to study you pursue.

First Things First

Jana Fadness makes a good argument[1] that you should learn something about your target language first. Some languages are more grammatically complex than others. Some have tones and/or pronunciation issues that are more difficult to master. Others have complicated writing systems. Later, I will discuss some useful thoughts on deconstructing a language, focusing on its grammatical aspects, but my point here is that knowing more about the language you want to learn can help you craft a better, personalized approach to learning and mastering it. To get an idea of your target language, the website *How to Learn Any Language*[2] offers a useful collection of language profiles, as does *Omniglot.*[3] *Wikipedia* can also be an excellent resource and, of course, you can always use your favorite search engine.

Another thing to consider when first learning a language is what you want to prioritize. Some language gurus have strong

opinions about this. For example, some believe you should start speaking day one and make that your focus. Some believe gaining a working knowledge of core vocabulary should come first. Others emphasize grammar. Most take a blended approach. I think you should be guided by your personal goals, the specific challenges of your target language, and your preferred learning systems. And consider whether your prioritization risks developing bad habits. For example, if you study a language with a different writing system, will using transliteration in the early days rather than learning the script end up hurting your later literacy goals? If you are studying a tonal language or a language with sounds you are unfamiliar with, will ignoring your bad pronunciation early on force you to relearn later and make it harder for others to understand you?

Learning Systems

Plenty of language learning systems exist. Some are formal, like Greg Thomson's growing participator approach,[4] Wendy Maxwell's[5] accelerative integrative methodology,[6] the social interactionist theory,[7] Stephen Krashen's[8] theory of second language acquisition,[9] and the relational frame theory.[10] Other systems are informal and found in various blogs and certain products, such as Gabriel Wyner's four stage system[11] and the *Fluent in 3 Months* Premium program.[12] Some systems are incorporated into paid programs, such as Pimsleur,[13] Speed Learning Languages,[14] Rosetta Stone,[15] Fluenz,[16] and Assimil.[17] A full and proper examination of these various learning systems is beyond what I want to accomplish here, though I encourage you to follow the provided links if you are interested in learning more.

On a more abstract level, Tim Ferriss, in his blog post, "How to Learn Any Language in 3 Months,"[18] offers his

opinion of the ideal learning system based on three elements (in order): **effectiveness** (priority), **adherence** (interest), and **efficiency** (process). These refer to the "what", "why", and "how" of learning a target language, respectively. In simple terms, you first decide what to learn, based on usage frequency (priority); you then filter materials based on your likelihood of continued study and review, or adherence (interest); finally, you determine how to learn the material most efficiently (process).

Of course, you don't need the "ideal" language learning system. Any system will work, eventually. But some methods are more effective than others and some are less likely to lead to frustration or quitting altogether. My advice is to craft or adopt a system that comprises three parts: a source of **interesting content** in the target language, a **method to understand** this content, and a **system to review and remember** what you've learned. Get those in place and you should be well on your way.

Are You Your Biggest Obstacle?

Regardless of what systems—if any—you choose to use, your unique learning style and personality will play an important role in your success. Certain personalities are fearless and outgoing enough to just start trying to speak with anyone and everyone they meet who knows their target language. Then there are the rest of us, with varying degrees of timidity and fear of embarrassment and judgment.

It is this fear and timidity that can derail or slow down our language learning progress. The fact is, there is NO way to learn a new language without making mistakes: LOTS of mistakes. Yes, you will sound silly. Repeatedly. But, here's the thing. If you're speaking with someone with whom you don't share a common language, there is no other option. And, if you are speaking in your target language instead of a common language, you are likely worrying for no reason about the other person's opinion. That they speak more than

one language means they know all too well how hard it is. And they will almost certainly be thrilled that you are attempting to learn their language. Think of things from another perspective. When someone tries to speak to you in broken English, for example, do you ridicule them and make them feel insecure or do you try to encourage their efforts?

When you consider these things, you realize that what we worry about isn't what others will think, but what we will think of ourselves. Be as forgiving, understanding and encouraging to yourself as you would be to others! It sounds easy to do but is not; still, you must learn to overcome the biggest language learning obstacle: yourself.

Goals and Motivation

Your goals should drive the learning methods you choose. Failing to align your goals with the ways you study can lead you to waste a lot of time on things that don't matter and/or to get bored or frustrated, possibly leading you to quit studying altogether.

Everyone has distinct language learning goals. It's not important what yours are, only that you have them and that they are concrete. In fact, what you need (in all aspects of life, really) are SMART goals. **S**pecific. **M**easurable. **A**ttainable (**A**ctionable). **R**ealistic. **T**imely. Saying you want to speak a language is not a SMART goal. Saying you want to master the present regular and irregular tense for at least fifty verbs after the first week is.

Also consider this difference in goals when you read advice on how to best learn a language from self-professed "gurus."

Their advice may be good for someone with their personal goals but may be ill-advised for other goals.

If you have a blog or are active on social networks, why not share your language goals with your friends and others who follow you? Also, share regular updates on how you are or are not meeting those goals. It will help build a personal connection with your followers and it will provide an added incentive for you to meet your goals.

Of course, you are unlikely to achieve your goals if you don't have a strong motivation for learning. There is no good or bad type of motivation. It only matters that yours is strong and sustainable. For example, I once had a Japanese friend who idolized a Norwegian snowboarder and was trying to master English enough to one day talk to him. You may consider that an unlikely event and thus fairly weak motivation, but I assure you it was strong for her and, in fact, she ended up meeting and chatting with him at least three times at competitions. In contrast, if your motivation is weak, you may filter out certain aspects of language input. Thus,

examine your motivation and attitude before considering specific learning strategies, methods, or tools.

Mark Manson summed up the importance of motivation[19] nicely when he wrote:

> Motivation is a tricky thing. You can will yourself to learn something difficult for a short period of time. But in the long-run, you need to be reaping some practical benefit from your efforts. Without that, you'll eventually burn out.

Adults vs. Children

Many people—perhaps yourself included—believe that children are better learners of language. While some evidence supports this belief, it is far from conclusive and there is much evidence to the contrary. Let's consider the issues that impact how you, as an adult learner, may differ from a child learning his or her first language.

Language Acquisition Device (LAD)

Noam Chomsky proposed the Language Acquisition Device (LAD)[20] in the 1960s. The LAD is a purported instinctive mental capacity which enables an infant to acquire and produce language. It is a part of the nativist theory of language, which asserts that humans are born with the instinct or "innate facility" for acquiring language. The main argument given in favor of the LAD was the poverty of the stimulus, which argues that unless children have significant

innate knowledge of grammar, they could not learn language as quickly as they do, given that they never access negative evidence and rarely receive direct instruction in their first language.

According to David J. James,[21] Chomsky once commented on the ease of learning a language before the age of five or six and the difficulty of doing so after that age. He and other linguists have discussed what faculty is lost, and how to measure it, but a counterargument is that no faculty is lost. Rather, that age corresponds with the onset of formal education and, thus, the introduction of self-conscious learning. Where children had learned passively, they now become aware that they are actively learning and expected to do so in structured ways. This further has implications in terms of shifting from the long-term memory essential to the easy learning of languages to a short-term memory more suited to academic subjects as currently taught.

Monitor Theory

Another way to consider the difference between learning a language as a child and another language as an adult is by considering Stephen Krashen's "Monitor Theory."[22] This theory considers subconscious language acquisition and conscious language learning, claiming that subconscious acquisition is far more important and the primary way in which children learn.

Subconscious acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language, which focuses not on the form of utterances, but on the messages being conveyed and understood. It hypothesizes an order of acquisition[23] notion that describes a stable order of acquisition of grammatical structures. There are similarities across learners—and languages—about which structures are learned early and which are learned late. Linguistic research has confirmed that this phenomenon is true for first-language learners; order of acquisition for second-language learners is much less consistent.

It is not clear why the order differs for second-language learners. It could be because of first-language influence or general cognitive interference from nonlinguistic mental faculties. Alternatively, it may be because of conscious language learning, which is thought to be helped significantly by error correction and presentation of explicit rules. This helps you come to the correct mental representation of the linguistic generalization. Since we can teach explicit rules in any order and correct errors at random times, the order of language acquisition is likewise variable.

The fundamental claim of Monitor Theory is that conscious learning is available only as a Monitor. The acquired system initiates utterances—what we learn through active communication determines our fluency in production. Our conscious learning may alter the output of the acquired learning, sometimes before and sometimes after we produce the utterance. We make these changes to improve accuracy, and the use of the Monitor often has this effect.

Aptitude and Attitude

A core issue of Monitor Theory concerns aptitude and attitude. Both appear to be related to second language achievement but do not relate to each other. It is possible to have both high aptitude and attitude, both low aptitude and attitude, or a mix of the two. Krashen argues that much of what we term aptitude relates to conscious learning, while attitudinal factors my more closely link to subconscious acquisition.

Monitor Theory, and its interrelationships with aptitude and attitude, can shed light on the cause of child-adult differences in second language attainment. Krashen suggests that the source of the Monitor is formal thinking, a stage many people reach at around age twelve. Formal thinkers learn new concepts primarily from verbal rather than from concrete experiences. The formal thinker also has a meta-awareness of his ideas, thus the ability to use a conscious grammar comes from formal learning. Thus, while formal learning may give us the Monitor, it also has negative effects

on language acquisition, which may be the primary cause of child-adult differences.

Formal learning may have profound consequences on attitude via complicated associations and influences. For example, it can lead to increased self-consciousness, feelings of vulnerability, and lowered self-image, which often leads to an increased affective filter (something that delimits input before we can process it) and a lowered ability to learn a second language.

Monitor Theory further leads to the following predictions.

- Aptitude, since it relates to conscious language learning, or the Monitor, will not strongly predict second language success in children learning a second language; and

- Attitudinal factors will predict second language achievement for children whenever intake is available.

- The "good language learner" is the learner who can get enough intake in the second language while having a low

affective filter to use this input for language acquisition. He or she may or may not be a conscious learner. If so, we would expect above average or superior language aptitude in such a person.

- There are three types of "bad language learners." The very worst has neither acquisition nor learning advantages. This might result from both attitudinal factors (lack of interest in the target language and its speakers and/or self-consciousness, anxiety, etc.) as well as low aptitude or interest in grammar. Two other types are the Monitor underuser, who will progress as far as his attitudes will take him and the Monitor overuser, who will be limited by his conscious knowledge and will suffer from a lack of spontaneity.

Nature of Input

Another important distinction between child and adult language learners is the nature of language input. A child is more likely to get "appropriate" input, by which I mean

exposure to language and activities that are natural, interesting, and understood. While an adult may easily find input that matches the first two of these requirements, achieving the third is more challenging. That's partly because we do not expect children to interact on the same level in either formal or informal interactions.

For example, "free conversation" is often different for children and adults. Children conversing together will often have a similar level, and adults that converse with children will not expect conversations with complicated grammar or vocabulary. Thus, for children, conversation may be appropriate input, whereas for adults it may not be.

Children are more likely to have caretakers, including family members and teachers, each with a vested interest in communicating with them at their level and seeing them succeed in language acquisition and growth. Thus, even though caretakers may not consciously calibrate the level of their language, they naturally estimate the child's level of competence via his or her output and reactions. Caretakers

also often use shorter speech and focus communication on the "here and now," which lends itself to being more easily comprehensible.

Many adult learners lack significant access to language caretakers. This is especially true for adults that try to learn without formal tutoring. Even if an adult makes use of formal tutoring, it will often use mechanical drilling, which focuses on the form of the language being used instead of its communicative intent. This is not natural and thus is not optimal intake for acquisition. Furthermore, students pay little attention to repetitive drills, and meaning rarely penetrates.

Children are also likely to get much more input exposure. This input, even if sometimes too difficult, is covered and reviewed many times. This increased and repeated exposure helps reduce the likelihood of misunderstood input.

Neurological Differences

There has been much research into neurological and biological differences between children and adult language learners and how they may be relevant. It's a fascinating—but complex—matter to explore, and I have barely done so. Still, my understanding is that while differences in second language acquisition potential exist, the evidence for attributing these to physical or neurological differences is lacking.

First Language Influence

Your first language can influence or "interfere" with your ability to learn a second language, but is only one of several sources of error. Still, you may find it useful to consider as you chart a course for your language study.

According to Krashen, researchers have found the following about how your first language influences your acquisition of a second language.

- First language influence is common in complex word order and in word-for-word translations of phrases.

- First language influence is weaker in bound morphology (e.g., omission of plurals on nouns, lack of subject-verb agreement, adjective-noun agreement).

- First language influence is strongest in "acquisition poor" environments. This suggests that we cannot conclude that adults show first language influence while

children do not. Instead, we see first language influence when second language acquirers get less intake or where affective conditions prevent or inhibit acquisition, regardless of age.

- First language influence is not proactive inhibition. It results from using the new language before learning it sufficiently. We use what we know from our first language to substitute what we do not know in our new language.

From the above, we can conclude that first language influence may indicate low acquisition of the second language and may act as a "substitute" for the new language. Keeping in mind the ideas associated with Monitor Theory, we can eliminate or at least reduce the influence with increased acquisition and language use and reduced inhibition via affective filters.

Another conclusion to be drawn is that having the first language as a crutch means we can sometimes communicate in a second language quickly by using the rules and structures we already know. This feels satisfying but may

introduce errors that vary in significance depending on how much difference exists in the rules and structures of the two languages. With more subconscious acquisition and conscious learning and feedback, we can correct these errors, but we must remember and focus on this point or we will develop poor speaking habits.

Learning Styles

Experts disagree on how important learning styles[24] or preferences are for language acquisition. They further disagree on whether learning styles are acquired preferences that are adaptable, either at will or through changed circumstances, or are fixed personality characteristics. Further, some scholars claim that learning style *preferences* do not align with learning style *strengths*.

Notable learning style models include:

- David Kolb's model outlines two approaches toward grasping experience: *Concrete Experience* and *Abstract Conceptualization*, as well as two approaches toward transforming experience: *Reflective Observation* and *Active Experimentation*.

- Walter Burke Barbe and colleagues propose three learning modalities (often identified by the acronym VAK):

(1) *Visualizing*; (2) *Auditory*; and (3) *Kinesthetic (physical).*

- Neil Fleming's VARK model expands on that by adding a fourth modality, *Social learning.*

- Anthony Gregorc's model considers how you acquire and process information. This model has two perceptual qualities: *concrete* and *abstract*, and two ordering abilities: *random* and *sequential*. Concrete perceptions involve registering information through the five senses, while abstract perceptions involve understanding ideas, qualities, and concepts which cannot be seen. Sequential ordering involves the organization of information in a linear, logical way, and random ordering involves the organization of information in chunks and in no specific order. There are four combinations of perceptual qualities and ordering abilities based on dominance: *concrete sequential, abstract random, abstract sequential*, and *concrete random.*

The above is only a small representation of different models to consider. In fact, one literature review identified 71 different models. I leave it to you to decide how relevant or irrelevant these or other models are for your language learning mission, but if you know you have a distinct preference, consider it when designing a course of study.

Keys to Learning and How Long Should It Take?

What is a realistic amount of time to learn a language? That is a complicated question which depends on the difficulty of the language being studied,[25] your goals, and how you define fluency or mastery. For an excellent look at this question, read Dr. Sarah Elaine Eaton's "How Long Does It Take to Learn a New Language?"[26]

When trying to understand the time needed, consider three key factors: the complexity of the language, the social context in which you learn, and your individual learning aptitude. In considering your aptitude, three factors are determinate: your ability to recognize, remember, and reproduce the sounds of the language; your ability to see grammatical patterns in the language; and the quality of your memory. For more information on these important factors, read Greg Thomson's "What? Me Worry About Language Learning?"[27]

Besides those three factors, consider Tim Ferriss's three key concepts—priority, interest, and process. The higher you prioritize your learning, the stronger your interest is, and the more refined and efficient your process, the faster you will learn.

Something else worth considering are the five skills researchers at Northwestern University found that underlie language acquisition[28]: phonological awareness, speech-in-noise perception, rhythm perception, auditory working memory and the ability to learn sound patterns. These are skills that musicians excel at and can speed the time to gain proficiency.

Finally, Chris Lonsdale offers five principles of rapid language acquisition.[29]

1.   Focus on language content relevant to you.

2.   Use the new language as a tool to communicate from day one.

3.   Focus on understanding what someone is trying to tell you instead of the words they are using (comprehensible input[30]).

4.   Focus on physiological training (listen to the sounds of the language that you're trying to learn to train your brain to let in the unfamiliar sounds).

5.   Your psychological state matters—you need to be happy, relaxed, and tolerant of ambiguity.

What is Fluency?

How to define language fluency is an interesting debate topic and many people have strong opinions about it. The debate isn't fruitful, however, because no "correct" definition exists. What is important is to find your own definition and align your learning goals to it. It may be helpful to consider that fluency describes a level of proficiency in communication, which includes:

- producing language with ease;

- speaking with a good but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary, syntax and grammar;

- expressing your ideas coherently; and

- producing continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties, with minimal breakdowns and disruptions.

Depending on your goals, you may place more or less importance on the accuracy and complexity of your language usage. For example, wanting to communicate with new friends in your target language may not need high levels of accuracy or complexity, but getting a corporate job that relies on that target language does. Ideally, fluency, accuracy, and complexity develop in harmony, but sometimes this doesn't happen, so you may need to watch these aspects as your learning journey progresses.

Learning Components and Order of Learning

Learning a language comprises at least the following six components: vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, listening, and speaking (pronunciation and practice). Culture is an important seventh part but tackling that is daunting so I will ignore it, though keep in mind that slang, humor, levels of politeness, and even silent forms of communication, are often influenced by the culture of the societies that speak the language.

Language study is challenging because no linear order exists for these learning components. Take, for example, speaking. You might think it comes last. But, although you won't speak without decent pronunciation, some vocabulary, and basic grammar mastery, those things won't come without trying to speak. Likewise, even if you can put together some coherent thoughts in writing or speaking, if you are trying to

have a conversation and haven't attuned your ear to the sound of the language, you will find great difficulty with communication. Reading's importance becomes much clearer if you try to learn a language that doesn't use the same writing system (e.g., the alphabet) that you know. For these languages, that often dictates that a basic study of writing takes higher priority.

Vocabulary

All aspects of learning a language are important, but none will help you communicate if you don't have a core vocabulary adequate for the task. Let's look at some important aspects of vocabulary.

Lexical Competence

Lexical competence concerns understanding words. Gairns and Redman[31] include the following components of lexical competence:

- **Boundaries between conceptual meaning**: knowing not only what a word refers to but also where the

boundaries are that separate it from words of related meaning (e.g., cup, mug, bowl).

- **Polysemy**: distinguishing between the various meanings of a single word form with several closely related meanings (head: of a person, of a pin, of an organization).

- **Homonymy**: distinguishing between the various NOT closely related meanings of a single word (e.g., a file: used to put papers in or a tool).

- **Homophyny**: understanding words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings (e.g., flour, flower).

- **Synonymy**: distinguishing between the different shades of meaning that synonymous words have (e.g., extend, increase, expand).

- **Affective meaning**: distinguishing between the attitudinal and emotional factors which depend on the

speaker's attitude or the situation. Socio-cultural associations are also important.

- **Style, register, dialect**: Being able to distinguish between different levels of formality, the effect of different contexts and topics, as well as differences in geographical variation.

- **Translation**: awareness of differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language (e.g., false cognates).

- **Chunks of language**: multi-word verbs, idioms, collocations (restrictions on how you can use words together, such as which prepositions are used with particular verbs, or which verbs and nouns are used together), and lexical phrases.

- **Grammar of vocabulary**: learning the rules that help build up different forms of the word or even different words from that word (e.g., sleep, slept, sleeping; able, unable, disability).

- **Pronunciation**: ability to recognize and reproduce items in speech.

Some of these components are important from the beginning and some are more relevant for advanced levels of fluency. Still, it's useful to consider them as vocabulary "meta" learning concepts.

Register

Register refers to how we use the language. Three distinct registers are of primary interest: oral (spoken language), written fiction, and written non-fiction. Certain words are used frequently in one register, but not in the other two. Other words are used frequently in two registers (usually both written), but not in the other. The relevance of register differences in vocabulary can vary across languages. Consider how relevant this may be for your target language when you study vocabulary. Focus on words more valuable to learn for the register you're most interested in mastering.

How Many Words?

A lemma is a root word and all its inflections or variations. In English, for example, *break, breaks, broke, broken* and *breaking* are forms of the same lexeme, with *break* as the lemma. Lexeme, in this context, refers to the set of all the forms that have the same meaning. Lemma refers to the particular form that is chosen by convention to represent the lexeme.

According to the BBC,[32] adult native speakers typically know 15,000 to 20,000 lemmas,[33] and according to Paul Nation and Robert Waring,[34] native speakers will add around 1,000 lemmas a year to their vocabulary size until they reach this level. That means that a five-year-old beginning school will have a vocabulary of around 4,000 to 5,000 lemmas.

It's difficult to acquire the adult level of vocabulary. The good news is you need far fewer words to hit various levels of proficiency. For example, according to the same BBC article, learning only 800 of the most frequently used lemmas in English will allow someone to understand 75% of the normal,

spoken language. To understand dialogue in film or TV, you'll need to know the 3,000 most common lemmas and if you want to understand novels, newspapers, and online articles, you need to learn 8,000 to 9,000 lemmas. Other sources[35] claim you need 5,000 words to read short novels for pleasure and 10,000 words to read first-year university materials.

A vocabulary sufficient to know 80% of the words in a text means that one word in every five (approximately two words in every line) is unknown. Research has shown[36] that this ratio of unknown to known words makes it difficult to guess the meaning of the unknown words. You need at least 95% coverage for that. Other research suggests that 95% coverage allows reasonable comprehension of a text. Of course, this depends on the register. I haven't seen any similar research on conversation. I suspect it depends on who you talk with, what topics you discuss, and the nature of interactivity.

The numbers from the BBC don't reference a source, but I have read in various places the similar claim that 1,000 words cover around 75% comprehension, but the article,

"How many words do I need to learn?"[37] claims that for Russian, 1,257 words get you 70% exposure while the number jumps to 2,925 to reach 80%. And the interesting article, "How Many Words Do You Need to Know in Spanish (or any other foreign language)? And WHICH Words Should You Be Learning?"[38] says the top 1,000 Spanish words allow you to understand 76.0% of non-fiction writing, 79.6% of fiction writing, and an astounding 87.8% of oral speech. Learning the top 2,000 words gets you to 84% for non-fiction, 86.1% for fiction, and 92.7% for oral speech. And learning the top 3,000 words gets you to 88.2% for non-fiction, 89.6% for fiction, and 94.0% for oral speech.

Part of the discrepancy may be because of the distinction between lexemes and lemmas and things vary depending on the language. Likewise, the register issue discussed above will change the coverage ratios. Regardless, the principle still applies—you only need to master a subset of words to gain decent language proficiency.

How to Study Vocabulary

Considering you can gain proficiency with a subset of the most commonly used words, focus at first on learning those words. As you engage in conversations and more advanced study, you will seek extra words to complete the thoughts you want to express. Joshua Foer agrees,[39] writing at the Guardian:

> It goes without saying that memorising the 1,000 most common words in Lingala, French, or Chinese is not going to make anyone a fluent speaker. That would have been an unrealistic goal. But it turns out to be just enough vocabulary to let you hit the ground running once you're authentically immersed in a language. And, more importantly, that basic vocabulary gives you a scaffolding to which you can attach other words as you hear them... [A]s I packed my memory with more and more words, these connections started to make sense and I began to

> notice the same grammatical formulas elsewhere –
> and could even pick them up in conversation.

Word Lists

There are multiple common words lists online. One is the *1000 Most Common Words*[40] site. Stuart Jay Raj compiled[41] another, shorter "first words" list in Google Sheets[42] for multiple languages. He based it on a list created by Gabriel Wyner, which itself draws on the *New General Service List.*[43] Two more collections worth checking out are the BNC/COCA Headword Lists[44] and the Oxford Learner's Word Lists.[45] The Oxford collection includes lists of 3,000 and 5,000 words, as well as a list of phrases. Each Oxford list aligns with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).[46]

One thing to keep in mind is that frequency lists can vary between written and spoken vocabulary and between languages. The 1,000 most common words in English may

not match the most common words for your target language, but many of them will.

Whether or not you use a common word list, pay special attention to the widely used "nuclear verbs," which cover motion (to go), production (to do/make), possession (to give/take), perception (to see/smell/hear/taste/touch), cognition (to know/understand), and communication (to say/hear/listen).

Another thing to consider is that some phrases behave like high frequency words ("good morning," "never mind"), and their meaning is not obvious from the meaning of the parts ("at once," "set out"). It may be difficult to find lists of set expressions for your target language, but it should be easier to find lists of idioms.

Besides a list of the most common words and set expressions, consider learning cognates—words that are similar between two languages. One way to find such words is to search online for "[language name] cognates" or "[language name] English loan words." Also, search for "[language name]

words in English" and "English words in [language name]" to find words borrowed by your target language from English and vice versa.

Spaced Repetition Systems (SRS)

Wherever you seek new vocabulary, one very useful tool to manage the learning process is a spaced repetition system (SRS).[47] SRS works on the principle of the spacing effect,[48] which states that we learn more effectively when study sessions are spaced out. More information is encoded into long-term memory by spaced study sessions, also known as spaced repetition or spaced presentation, than by massed presentation ("cramming").

Perhaps the first modern incarnation of SRS is the Leitner system,[49] developed by Sebastian Leitner in the 1970s. In this system, flashcards are sorted into groups (boxes) according to how well you know each one. All cards start in the first box, which you will review each day. As you review each card, if you succeed in recalling the word and its meaning, you place

it in the next box, which contains cards you review less frequently, say every 3 days. If you fail at recalling that word, you put it back in the original box. When you review the second box, you apply the same principle. Known cards get moved to a third box, reviewed less frequently, say every week. Unknown cards go back to the first box. This way, cards you know better get reviewed less often and cards you know less well get reviewed more often. If you set the intervals correctly, you will see a word just as you are about to forget it.

These days, there are many digital SRS systems which allow you to avoid the trouble of managing paper flashcards and boxes. The most popular is probably Anki,[50] a free tool for computer, web, and phone. Instead of placing cards in boxes, Anki prompts you to rate how difficult or easy the card is after reviewing it and uses this feedback to reschedule exposure to each card. With Anki, you can create your own cards or you can use cards that other users have already created (you can volunteer your cards for public use as well). In fact, Anki is a great place to find lists of vocabulary to get

started. Another useful feature is the ability to include images and even audio with your flashcards.

Anki is great, but it can be geeky and the learning curve involved in using it to the fullest is steep. Alternatives include the vocabulary trainer at LanguageCourse.net[51] (free; search the app store for "LanguageCourse.net" and then find the app for your target language), Quizlet[52] (freemium), SuperMemo[53] (freemium), or Gabriel Wyner's Fluent Forever[54] (paid).

Contextual Learning

You more easily retain words whose meanings you infer from context because you actively process the word and its meaning more when inferring than when directly seeing the meaning. Thus, combining contextual learning and spaced repetition study is a great idea. Two useful tools for that are Clozemaster[55] (freemium) and Glossika[56] (paid). The former is a flashcard app that focuses on fill-in-the-blank exercises using sentences, otherwise known as cloze tests (Anki supports cloze tests as well). The latter is a well-established

program that also focuses on sentences. It's not cheap, but it gets excellent reviews.

Another sentence-focused, contextual learning idea is the 10,000 Sentences method popularized by *All Japanese All the Time (AJATT)*.[57] The idea is to learn 10,000 sentences in your target language. According to AJATT, you've "learned" a sentence when you:

- read it in full, aloud, in its native script;

- know the meaning of every word in the sentence; and

- write the sentence by hand in its native script.

Finding the 10,000 sentences might be tricky, but once you do, the SRS programs listed can be a good way to study them. One tool that can help is Tatoeba,[58] an online database of sentences and their translations.

A final contextual learning tool to consider is ReadLang,[59] a Chrome extension that lets you read any native content, translate the words and phrases you don't know, and learn words in context using flashcards. From the words and

phrases you translate, ReadLang picks the most useful words for you to practice based on word frequency lists (and automatically translates them). As you practice, ReadLang schedules words using a spaced repetition algorithm. ReadLang can also export your library of flashcards and is compatible with Anki.

Language Programs and Vocabulary Learning Tools

Most [commercial language learning programs](#) include vocabulary acquisition. Likewise, several online resources can help with learning vocabulary. Some popular learning sites and apps have vocabulary as part of their learning offerings and a few focus on vocabulary, including Drops,[60] Duolingo,[61] Internet Polyglot,[62] LingQ,[63] Memrise,[64] MosaLingua,[65] and Reverso Context.[66]

Bi-Directional Study

Whatever program, online service or dead-tree method you choose, don't forget to study vocabulary in both directions.

Only studying from target language to native language will help you recognize words, but you may not recall them when speaking. For at least the first months—and when you have limited study time—give preference to recall, since doing so gets you recognition, whereas training for recognition doesn't always help with recall. Anki is useful since it lets you choose the manner in which to study your flashcards.

Repetition

When you learn an unfamiliar word, try to use it a few times right away. This is common advice for people that have trouble remembering the names of people they meet, and it is helpful for learning new vocabulary as well. Studies show that you need to hear a word between 6 times[67] to 17 times[68] before you learn it.

Word Groupings

Language textbooks and phrase books often group words by theme or subject. For example, words for days of the week, rooms in a house, items found in the kitchen, animals, etc. I

have read conflicting advice about whether learning vocabulary in such groupings is helpful. One school of thought says that grouping helps create strong associations. The other school of thought claims doing so causes words to interfere with each other; you will take longer to memorize them, and you'll forget them more easily.

Using Images to Confirm Meaning

Some unfamiliar words may be subtly (and sometimes, not-so-subtly) different from their English translation. When learning these words, make a habit of searching for them using Google Images. Review 20-40 resulting pictures and try to spot the differences between what you see and what you expect to see. If you are using your own custom digital flashcards, save one image to use for that word's card.

Common Word Novels

Studying vocabulary with flashcards and similar apps is helpful but can sometimes be mind-numbing. One alternative is to read a novel or short story written for language learners.

For example, my Spanish teacher had me read *Noche Oscura*,[69] a novel written in Spanish for Spanish language students. It's an entertaining read, and it uses the thousand most common Spanish words. It also uses footnotes to explain word and grammar usage you might not know. The author even included exercises to do alone or with a teacher. I don't know how many similar books exist for other languages, but if you can find one, I highly recommend using it to study.

Next Level

What should you do after you have learned the top words and cognates in your target language and when do frequency lists stop paying dividends? That depends, but consider stopping somewhere after 2,000-3,000 words. At that point, you'll get more value by customizing your vocabulary. Consider how you want to use your language skills and seek vocabulary that can help do that. For example, if you intend to go on to academic study, then you will need the general

academic vocabulary found on the University Word List (UWL).[70]

More Vocabulary Building Tips

Other ideas for learning more vocabulary include word of the day services, song lyrics (check out the LyricsTraining[71] app), and using subtitles with videos (check out FluentU,[72] Language Learning with Netflix,[73] and Viki Learn Mode[74] for help with this). Reading often—articles, blogs, books—in your target language should also be on your radar.

One tool in particular that merits special consideration is Learning With Texts (LWT).[75] It is free software you can install yourself or you can use an online version,[76] though that site provides no information about ownership or privacy policy. The idea behind LWT is that you import texts you want to use for learning (you can copy and paste from any online source). While listening to the audio (optional), you read the text, save, review, and test "terms" (words or multi word expressions, two to nine words). LWT keeps track of what you are learning

as you go. When you import new texts, your saved words and expressions are displayed (highlighted or not) according to their current learn statuses. Clicking a word will show translations and romanization readings and you can edit, change the status, or lookup the word in a dictionary. LWT also lets you test your understanding of words and expressions, with or without sentence context. You can import words you already know in various formats or you can export your personalized LWT vocabulary to Anki.[77] You can even see your progress on the statistics page. To learn more about LWT, check out Benny's LWT video.[78] It's a bit old but still useful.

Grammar

Very few of us enjoy learning grammar. Some people even advocate ignoring it completely, while others suggest ignoring it until after you have developed a basic comfort in conversation. Like many aspects of learning, the importance

of learning grammar depends on your language goals and your personality and preferred learning style.

When I was studying Spanish, I met countless travelers who had a primary goal of learning enough Spanish to make their travels easier. My goal, in contrast, was to one day reach fluency. Grammar is much more important for someone with my goal but may not be worth the effort if you don't have the time or the desire to speak in a grammatically correct way. Even if you have enough time, learning grammar without being able to practice and use it may be a wasted effort. The best approach is to match your grammar acquisition with your ability to take advantage of it.

What Does Grammar Do?

In every language, grammar does one or more of the following three things.

1. It adds words (e.g., changing "you love it" to "do you love it?")

2.   It changes existing words (e.g., changing "I do it" to "I did it")

3.   It changes the order of words (e.g., changing "This is good" to "Is this good?")

Keep this in mind as you encounter sentences and phrases in your new language. For example, Thai teachers usually teach that *mâi dâi* (ไม่ได้) means "cannot" or "unable to." So, *pǒm gin mâi dâi* (ผมกินไม่ได้) means "I cannot eat" (*pǒm* means "I" and *gin* means "to eat"), but if you switch the location in the sentence to *pǒm mâi dâi gin* (ผมไม่ได้กิน) the meaning changes completely to "I didn't eat." This grammatical difference confused me early in my study because I wasn't considering the relevance or importance of word order.

Deconstruct It

In an article for Matador, "5 steps to learn a language in 3 months,"[79] Michelle Schusterman discusses advice from Tim Ferriss to deconstruct the language[80] you are trying to learn before getting too deeply into other learning aspects.

Translating a few simple sentences with an online translator can tell you a lot about your target language. Ferriss gives us these to start.

- The apple is red.

- It is John's apple

- I give John the apple.

- We give him the apple.

- He gives it to John.

- She gives it to him.

You use these sample sentences, along with a few others, to deconstruct a target language, which can help you see the big picture, especially if that language has a basic grammatical structure different from English. For example, Japanese and Korean (similar grammatically) follow a subject-object-verb (SOV) word order ("I the apple eat") as opposed to the subject-verb-object (SOV) order for English ("I eat the apple"). If you're a native English speaker, SOV will be harder

than the familiar SVO, but learning one such language will format your brain for new SOV languages.

Besides basic grammatical structure, many languages have feminine and masculine distinctions in vocabulary and direct ("the apple") and indirect ("John") objects and their respective pronouns ("him", "it"). The placement of these objects and pronouns can also vary.

Pay attention to verbs, which conjugate in some languages based on speaker (both according to gender and number). Likewise, the equivalents of prepositions can get tricky.

Ferriss's first three sentences expose if the language has what he calls the much-dreaded noun cases. What are they? In German, for example, "the" isn't so simple. It might be *der*, *das*, *die*, *dem*, *den* and more, depending on whether "the apple" is an object, indirect object, possessed by someone else, etc.

Ferriss recommends following the above sentences with a few negations ("I don't give...") and different tenses to see if these are expressed as separate words (*bu* in Chinese as

negation, for example) or verb changes (-*nai* or -*masen* in Japanese), the latter making a language much more difficult.

Here are three more useful sentences.

- I must give it to him.

- I want to give it to her.

- I want you to give it to her.

These sentences are useful to see if auxiliary verbs exist, or if you must change the verb endings. According to Ferriss, a good shortcut for independent study is to learn "helping" verb conjugations, such as "to want," "to need," "to have to," "should," etc. In Spanish and similar languages, this allows you to express yourself with "need/want/must/should" + the infinitive of any verb, at least when only one person is performing an action in the sentence. Thus, learning the variations of a half dozen verbs gives you access to all verbs. For talking about situations where one person needs/wants another person to do something, the dreaded subjunctive might appear. That's the value of the third sentence above.

Languages that express these auxiliaries as changes in the verb (e.g., Japanese) instead of separate words (e.g., Chinese) may cause some problems for beginners.

You won't master grammar by a quick deconstruction exercise, but you will get an idea of what you are up against and what you should pay more attention to as you learn.

Practice It

Recalling grammar rules is hard in real-time when speaking or listening due to speed. To practice recently acquired grammar, focus on one particular rule or structure either in an actual conversation or with the help of a tutor. Writing is also great practice to correct grammatical use since you have plenty of time to think and you can more easily seek correction from a friend, tutor or online resource.

Listening

Language is auditory. Our brains naturally learn languages by listening. Even if you consider yourself a visual or tactile learner, your brain still needs to listen to learn a

language fully. Fortunately, the opportunities to expose yourself to the sounds of your target language are many in today's digital world: music, radio, movies or television, exchange partners, and podcasts.

Regular podcasts are usually too difficult for beginner and intermediate learners, but many exist for language learners. Apple users can navigate to the **education** category of the iTunes music store. Android users can search the Google Podcasts page.[81] That page doesn't have a convenient browse feature, but searching for "learn [language]" should yield something good.

One well-known podcast company is Innovative Language Learning,[82] which offers podcasts and lessons in the "Pod101"[83] brand (e.g., spanishpod101.com[84]) for 34 different languages. The podcast is free but extras, including downloadable transcripts, require a paid membership. A similar company is Radio Lingua Network, which offers the "Coffee Break Languages"[85] brand for eight languages and a more introductory level brand called "One Minute

Languages."[86] A similar company is Linguistica 360,[87] which offers a series of "News in Slow" weekly podcasts in which a native speaker reads a news report of current events spoken at a slower rate to understand it more easily.

TV programs are great for listening to your target language. They offer hours of listening content with a consistent plot line, vocabulary and voice actors, so by the time you feel comfortable (usually after a few hours), you still have hours of content left to enjoy. To make those first few hours easier, read episode summaries ahead of time in your target language. You can find them on Wikipedia or IMDB,[88] and they'll help you follow along while your ears are getting used to spoken content. If you're not sure where to start, Frank Andrade analyzed and ranked 500 TV shows[89] available on Netflix for how much basic vocabulary they contained in their dialogues (he did the same for 3,000 movies).

Online videos offer yet another excellent chance to improve your listening skills. You can find many on YouTube (try

searching for "learn [language]" or "[language] online courses"). This can be hit or miss and some online lessons use too much English and not enough target language, but once you find videos you enjoy, YouTube will automatically recommend others suitable for your level. If you are at a more advanced level, check out the Trending feature on YouTube[90] to see what's popular in a country that speaks your target language. If you are not in that country, you need to change your location in the YouTube settings. How to do this differs on mobile apps and desktop but in both cases, it is easy, so search online for instructions if you don't know how. Interest-based vloggers can also be an excellent source of natural, advanced target language listening practice. Music videos are also easy to find on YouTube and can be a fun way to improve your listening skills and pick up new vocabulary. Do some online research or ask native speakers about artists who sing in your target language and search for their videos. For any of the above YouTube ideas, use the playlist feature to save and

segregate your favorite videos so you can watch them again and again.

When you are ready to tackle radio in your target language, TuneIn[91] is a great way to find live streamed feeds from all over the world.

Regardless of which listening sources you prefer, one useful technique if you are at a lower proficiency level is to listen at a reduced speed. You can do this for YouTube videos by clicking the "cog" symbol in the lower right corner of the video to access the playback settings. Netflix offers a dedicated playback speed icon in the bottom right of the player. Audible offers a similar option for audiobooks. For other audio sources, try tools like Speedshifter[92] and Audacity[93] that allow you to vary the speed of audio files without altering the pitch. Both tools also offer a useful loop feature that allows you to repeat a section of a track for repeated listening.

Reading

Reading is a fantastic way to improve your vocabulary and grammar. Depending on the source of your reading material, you can get exposed to different levels of politeness in a language and standard vocabulary, slang, and idiomatic and colloquial expressions.

The key problem with learning by reading is getting to the threshold where you can learn from context. Without knowing enough of the words on a page, you cannot easily learn from context. Liu Na and Nation have shown[94] that we need a vocabulary of around 3,000 words—to give 95% coverage of a text—before we can efficiently learn from context with unsimplified text sources.

Assuming you have a sufficient knowledge of vocabulary or are a patient reader willing to lookup unknown words, good sources of reading material include newspaper or magazine websites, comics, and books in your target language. A useful tool to help with these reading materials is an [e-reader like the Amazon Kindle](). Besides the incredible convenience Kindle

provides, the main advantage for reading in another language is the ability to buy a dictionary for your target language and set it as the default so that when you select an unknown word, the definition appears on the screen. I often use my Kindle in this way to read books in Spanish. If you want to invest in an e-reader, I recommend you check out the already discussed [Learning With Texts (LWT)](#).

If you are someone who likes to focus on reading and listening together when learning a new language, you might consider Assimil[95] and Beelinguapp.[96] Assimil uses audio recordings of books that have one side printed in the target language and the other side printed in your native language. Beelinguapp is a mobile app that uses the same parallel text method with a library of articles and short stories narrated by a native speaker that you can filter by your skill level and topic of interest.

When you are ready to tackle full-length books, consider the following four selection criteria.

1. Search for books that are suitable for your reading level. Many people advocate reading young children's books, but the vocabulary can be strange or, at least, not always useful for an adult. Such books may also use non-standard sentence structure. Books for older children (nine years old and up) contain normal language and are often entertaining for adults too. You can often find book lists suitable for each age, though doing so in your target language may need the help of a native speaker or using a localized version of Google.

2. Choose books on topics for which you have knowledge, as this will help focus on specialized vocabulary development. Consider re-reading books you enjoyed and for which you can recall the story in detail, though be careful to verify they are at a suitable level.

3. Find books that interest you and will hold your attention even if you have to struggle somewhat to finish

them. Again, books you already read and enjoyed can be a good place to start.

4. Consider length. Should you read a long book or short book? Choosing shorter books will let you will finish faster and feel a strong sense of accomplishment. Longer books give you more time with familiar characters, settings, and the vocabulary and writing style of the author. Since authors have vocabulary and grammar preferences, this can be helpful. Regardless of length, consider reading book series that maintain characters and an underlying theme or story.

Reading + Listening

Where possible, look for opportunities to combine your listening and reading activities to enhance the learning from both. Consider:

- books and their audiobook versions,

- podcasts that include a transcript,

- songs with lyrics, and

- video with subtitles (in the original language).

Pronunciation

While much of your pronunciation development will come with practice and exposure to the language, you can do some things when self-studying to improve your pronunciation.

First, many language software programs include pronunciation, so if you decide to use such a program (online or offline), make sure that it is included.

Second, online communities exist that allow you to record yourself speaking and get native speaker feedback. Alternatively, if you have text and are wondering how to pronounce it, you can use Rhinospike.[97]

Third, depending on the language you are studying, there may be an online dictionary that includes recordings of the word entries. Forvo[98] is a great resource covering over 280 languages. It claims to be the world's largest pronunciation guide. If the word you are seeking doesn't yet exist on Forvo you can request it and another user will pronounce it for you.

Fourth, dictation (speech recognition) software is an excellent way to check your pronunciation. These days, many software programs and apps include it, so you may not need to buy a special program. For example, Microsoft Word and Google Docs both have excellent speech recognition tools. Popular chat apps include it as well or you can use the Gboard keyboard (Android or iOS) to talk to write in most places where you can type with a keyboard.[99]

Fifth, you can try Olle Kjellin's chorus repetition approach[100] to gaining native-like prosody[101] (elements of speech that are not individual phonetic segments—vowels and consonants—but are properties of syllables and larger units of speech, including linguistic functions such as intonation, stress, and rhythm). Built around the concept of speech shadowing,[102] the idea is that a small number of sentences—any sentences—can cover all prosody and pronunciation in a language. There is some flexibility in using this approach, but you will need access to natural (non-textbook) sentences with accompanying audio. A good place to start is with 30

sentences, one per day. First, listen to a slow version a few times (use Speedshifter[103] or Audacity[104] to do this). Repeat at least a hundred times for each sentence. When you need a break, listen to the seven sentences for that week. After your ears begin to recognize words, repeat aloud what you hear. Record yourself saying the sentences 2-3 times per practice sentence on day 0, 15, and 30 and check for pronunciation mistakes. Finally, get a native speaker (friend or professional teacher) to critique your pronunciation. If you have mastered the sentences after 30 days, move on to other audio-rich methods, including Glossika, Mimic Method, and Pimsleur. If you haven't mastered them, repeat the process until you do.

A similar idea to Olle's chorus repetition approach is Gabriel Wyner's minimal pairs method.[105] Where chorus repetition focuses on sentences, the minimal pairs method focuses on word pairs that sound similar to a non-native speaker's ears. You can make your own minimal pairs study material, but it can be a lot of work. Alternatively, you can try

the Fluent Forever pronunciation trainer app,[106] though only 16 languages are available now.

Finally, here are two last tips. If you enjoy singing, try learning songs in your target language. This is a fun way to improve your pronunciation and vocabulary. If you arrange a language exchange, try reading material out loud and ask your partner to correct your pronunciation.

Speaking

The best way to get speaking practice is to meet native speakers. This is easier to do if traveling in a country that speaks your target language. Still, doing so in your home country is not always difficult, especially if you live in or near a large city.

One great tool for meeting others around the world is Meetup,[107] a site that brings together people with similar interests for in-person meetings. You can search by language or city/postal code to find a nearby group. I have used Meetup for both Japanese and Spanish and was happy with

the practice I got and the new friends I made. My groups contained mostly other learners but also some native speakers (often married to a learner, for example).

Another very useful resource is CouchSurfing.[108] Primarily known for helping travelers meet and stay with fellow travelers, CouchSurfing is also a fantastic community that makes it easy to meet new people since many cities have groups focused on different interests, similar to Meetup.

Language Exchange

Meetup and CouchSurfing can both be helpful for finding organized language exchanges. Even if there is no language exchange in your city, you can post a message to the main group for that city offering an exchange. InterNations,[109] Mundo Lingo,[110] and PolyGlot Club[111] are a few other community sites that offer language exchanges. I have attended Mundo Lingo events in Chiang Mai and there was strong attendance from speakers of many languages. You can use the official Mundo Lingo website, but each city has its

own Facebook group, which is often more convenient. In fact, Facebook is a great way to find language exchanges, as your city may have one or more relevant groups. If not, you can create one yourself.

Although not a community site or social network, well-known ticketing agency Eventbrite[112] offers free events that include language exchanges. Just search "language exchange" and you may find an event near you.

Various apps and websites also promise to help you find language exchange partners. Some of them even offer translation tools and error correction to help if your level is still low. Unfortunately, my experience has been that most of these services are not especially good. There are three main reasons for this. First, none of them has become dominant, so they all struggle to attract a large membership. Without enough members to find suitable matches, people often register and then quickly abandon the service. Thus, many of the existing member profiles are inactive. Second, most of these services try to monetize by restricting some features to

paid accounts, often to such a degree that the free account isn't worth the effort. Third, some of them offer inadequate search and filter options.

In the past, iTalki and Livemocha were two great options. Both were free and had many members. Unfortunately, iTalki discontinued that feature and Rosetta Stone bought Livemocha and has since discontinued the language partner feature. Below I list other options and detail my experience using them. If you want to skip the reading and know which ones I find useful, I recommend checking out Interpals, Conversation Exchange, and Tandem for free options and HelloTalk if you are willing to pay.

Amikumu[113] hopes to create a social network that provides speakers, signers and users of the world's languages with a platform to communicate and share relevant information, regardless of the social, political or economic status of each language. One interesting feature of the service is that you can add a bio and name for each language you speak.

My Experience: I might not have given this one a long enough look, but the user experience seemed lacking. Maybe its simplicity is its charm, but I could find any search feature or other filter options. In addition, there aren't enough members.[114]

Conversation Exchange[115] is a Web-only service that's been around since 2005 (and the design shows). It claims 850,000 users. You can exchange messages using the chat feature or you can find a language partner near you and arrange for a meetup after connecting through the website.

My Experience: Overall I like this site. One plus for serious students is that the profiles use an avatar instead of uploaded photos, so that should discourage use as a dating site. Unfortunately, there weren't many active members in my city.

Easy Language Exchange[116] is a simple to use and free Web-only language exchange website. You enter your personal information and then use a member directory where you can find your match.

My Experience: There weren't many potential partners and the search feature has no filter options.

HelloTalk[117] facilitates communication between 30 million native speakers in over 150 languages with text, audio and video using built-in language tools, including translation, pronunciation, transliteration, and corrections. It also offers HelloWords (a vocabulary trainer), courses in selected languages, and a live online class recommendation service. Besides these features, HelloTalk offers a social media feed called Moments, where you can post pictures or updates and they become public (you can also post requests for corrections and record yourself speaking). I have read that it's easier to find partners in the Moments section than via the search feature.

Note: Many people raved about HelloTalk in the past, but many of the formerly free features require a paid account and the app now has many negative reviews.

My Experience: I used HelloTalk a long time ago and found it promising, but when I tried it again, I thought that the free plan limitations plus the ads and nags to upgrade were annoying. Also, instead of one premium plan that unlocks all features, HelloTalk offers a VIP plan for social features and a Plus plan for courses. On the

positive side, since it has been very popular for a long time, it does have many members. I also thought the HelloWords feature and the online courses (written dialogues with accompanying audio) that I tried were decent.

Idyoma[118] claims to do language exchange differently by putting quality first. With one-click blocking, control over who can find you, and verified profiles, you can explore the world safely and not waste energy on people you don't want to chat with.

My Experience: Despite its claims, Idyoma seems to have adopted a Tinder-style model where you can swipe left or right. When I tried the app, there were not many users and there were only three people available near me.

InterPals[119] began life as an international pen-pal website. It's been around since 1998 and the site looks like it, but there are now mobile apps (search for them on Google as they are not listed on the website itself). The search filters are helpful and you can save them for repeated use. You can also

create filters for who you want to be able to contact you. The site is supported by ads rather than premium memberships.

My Experience: Scammers sometimes use the site (you can report them) and some people use it as a dating site, but I have had moderate success finding people for language exchange.

Language Pal[120] is part of the Hello Pal suite of apps but as of this writing the site says the app is being redeveloped and will be relaunched soon.

MyLanguageExchange.com[121] claims to have over 3 million members from over 175 countries, practicing 164 languages.

My Experience: The free functionality is so limited that I cannot recommend this site unless you are willing to pay.

Speaky[122] aims to connect you with a language partner who shares your interests and passions. You can chat or make calls (audio and video) from the browser while mobile apps support text and audio messages. One unique feature is the ability to find native speakers or non-native speakers in learning a new language.

My Experience: As soon as I finished my registration, there was a cybersex spam message waiting for me. Not a promising start. Furthermore, the profile options are lacking, so filtering members to find a good exchange partner is difficult (no location filter is available).

Tandem[123] reviews each application to prevent fake accounts. Once accepted, you will see a stream of potential partners who are native speakers in the language you want to learn and you can chat with partners via instant messages, voice messages, audio calls, and video calls. The app has built-in language tools for translation, pronunciation, transliteration, and corrections.

My Experience: Filtering options are limited, even more so with a free account (you can filter by location but you cannot see the individual results). They claim millions of members, but there weren't many potential matches where I live (Chiang Mai). The push notifications can be tiresome and a bit confusing, as they imply you have made new matches when they are really just announcing that more people who you could match with have recently joined.

The Mixxer[124] is a free, nonprofit virtual language exchange site hosted by Dickinson College. Live chat with users on the site. Offline users receive an email.

My Experience: The search filters are minimal (native language, target language, and country). With no city filter option, it's difficult to find local partners.

Finally, one of your best options may be a dating app like Tinder[125] or Bumble,[126] since the number of users is astronomical compared to the language exchange options listed. You should clearly mention in your profile that you are only looking for language exchange (unless you are also looking to date).

Regardless of how or where you find language exchange partners, consider the following potential pitfalls.

- Language exchanges are often poor options when you are a complete beginner.

- Conflicting interests—each of you wants to focus on learning the other person's language—can lead to disappointment or frustration if you don't take active steps to plan meetings to help both of you equally.

- Conflicting personalities can cause one person to get more from the exchange than the other.

- Free flowing conversation can be helpful but may not touch on vocabulary or topics that you wish to focus on. Likewise, it may not address weaknesses in pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar. If that becomes the case, consider adding more structure to your exchanges to get more value from them.

- Your exchange partners may not speak their own language very well (though even that may have advantages for hearing natural, albeit incorrect, local language).

- Language exchange sites sometimes harbor creeps, perverts, scammers, and clueless people (e.g., those that don't speak any of your target languages) and you may have to deal with contacts from these as you try to find good matches.

Here are a few tips to help ensure a better language exchange.

- Be patient with your partner and wait for him or her to finish sentences.

- Try to be balanced in the distribution of time spent on each language.

- Take a genuine interest in your partner and use that interest to guide conversation.

- Adjust the speed and level of vocabulary you use if your partner's level demands it.

- Be more or less organized to fit the nature of your partnership.

- Discuss what you each wish to accomplish with the exchange.

- Come to an agreement about how much time you are prepared to commit and verify your schedules are compatible to match that commitment.

- Occasionally discuss how things are going and if either of you wants to make any changes to the exchange.

English Speaking Partners?

Keep in mind that while you may think it a good idea to have friends or language exchange partners who speak English well, you may feel more comfortable making mistakes when practicing with someone who is not such a great English speaker. You will have to work harder to communicate without having the backup of just switching to English, but in the long run, this will be very helpful.

Learning from Other Non-Natives

One thing I have learned is that it is often easier to understand other non-native speakers when trying to learn a language. Interacting with these folks can be less intimidating and more comfortable than interacting with native speakers. One thing I did when taking Spanish classes in Guatemala was to attend a twice-weekly conversation club of other Spanish school students at a local bar. The group was a mix

of various levels and nationalities. Besides being a great way to make new friends, it was helpful to notice the mistakes others made and reflect on whether I was making those same mistakes. It was also good to teach lower-level students things I had mastered and to ask higher level students questions of my own. And, it was interesting to see what different vocabulary or phrases others used compared to my own preferences. The point is, don't assume that you have nothing to gain from talking with other students of the language.

Writing

The challenge of writing in your target language will depend on the difficulty of the language being studied. Writing in languages that use a variation of the English alphabet will be easier, though diacritics[127] can complicate things. Other languages, such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Thai, use writing systems that can take a long time to learn and will thus limit the speed of your writing skills improvement. For such languages, there will be a difference

between handwriting and typing, as the ability to recall a Chinese character, for example, is not the same as the muscle memory required to write that same character. In any case, you can practice your writing using the services HiNative,[128] iTalki,[129] PolyGlot Club,[130] Reddit,[131] and StackExchange.[132] You can also use your language exchange partners to help correct your writing.

If you are learning a language that uses an unfamiliar writing system, you can install the relevant keyboard tool for your computer or your mobile phone. One alternative I like is using Google Translate to type transliterated words that convert to the local script (you can also use the Google Input Tools[133] page). If more than one word choice is available, you will see all options in a dropdown and you can select the correct one. Unfortunately, this method only works with a computer, not a mobile phone.

One useful writing aid worth considering is LanguageTool,[134] a multilingual grammar, style, and spell checker. You can use it as a browser add-on or extension

(useful for writing emails, blog posts, tweets, etc.) or integrate it with your favorite writing tool (Google Docs, MS Word, OpenOffice, and LibreOffice). LanguageTool supports English, German, Spanish, French, and Portuguese.

Language School or Private Tutoring?

Should you take formal classes, either as part of a language school, local university, or with a private tutor? That depends on your budget, schedule, and learning goals. Keep in mind that these days, many schools and individual teachers offer Skype lessons. Thus, you don't need to travel to learn from native speakers and schools in another country. In fact, it may be cheaper to take Skype lessons than to attend a school in your town.

My earlier advice on exchange partners who aren't fluent English speakers applies to your language teachers. My Spanish speaker never spoke in English. She claimed she doesn't speak English, though I am not convinced. Regardless, she had the experience and discipline to never try. It made learning more difficult at the beginning stages, but I am convinced in the end I benefited and progressed

much faster than if I had the crutch of asking her questions in English every time I was confused or lost for a word.

I wrote an article, "Tips for Choosing a Spanish School,"[135] which might prove helpful if you decide to study in a private language school. Summarizing, the important factors to consider are the teachers employed at the school (and how the school treats them), the teaching techniques and materials used, the other students you will study with, lodging and/or homestay options, availability of specializations and certifications if required, price, location, facilities, and activities.

If you decide that paid online tutoring or lessons is worthwhile, try doing an online search for language schools in a country where they speak the language you want to learn. Alternatively, check out the sites iTalki,[136] LingQ,[137] Preply,[138] TUTOROO,[139] Verbalplanet,[140] and Verbling.[141] Craigslist or similar websites in locations that speak your target language can also be useful, though take care to avoid scammers. If you want to help displaced refugees, you can

use NaTakallam[142] to find refugee tutors and teachers of Arabic, Armenian, French, Kurdish, Persian, or Spanish.

When trying to choose an online teacher, consider not just the overall rating from fellow students but what they say. What makes a teacher great for one student may not make him or her great for you. For example, some reviews may complain that the teacher doesn't speak English well, but if you only want to speak in your target language, that may be a good thing. Likewise, some teachers may focus on grammar while others tend to ignore it. This could lead to positive or negative reviews, depending on the interests of the students. If you are a beginner, try to find reviews that say a teacher is patient and speaks slowly, as that will help. When you are more advanced, look for teachers that speak more naturally. If working on pronunciation is important to you—especially for tonal languages—look for reviews that discuss this. Do you prefer a strict teacher that corrects your mistakes, someone that ignores them, or someone with a balanced approach? You may also want to consider personality

matches. For example, if you are shy, you may prefer an outgoing teacher.

Don't limit yourself to one teacher. The better marketplaces offer discounted trial lessons, so take advantage of these to try several teachers before deciding which you prefer. Before even getting to that point, write a personal message to each promising teacher, stating what you hope to learn with him or her. Mention your level and what you want to do during the lesson. This will give them a chance to make sure they're the right teacher for you.

After you've had a few sessions with different teachers, you'll get the feel for the different teaching styles, and you'll notice that some tactics work well for you and others don't. Abandon any teacher that doesn't suit your learning style and needs.

You may find multiple suitable teachers. If so, you must decide whether to choose one or use two or more. For example, you may want one teacher that you can have pleasant conversations with and one that focuses on grammar

or more structured lessons. If you are learning a language with multiple regional accents and/or dialects, use multiple teachers that cover that diversity.

Don't forget to leave good reviews for the teachers you choose (and even those you don't). If you are thinking of leaving a bad review, first ask yourself if the teacher is indeed bad or if his or her style doesn't suit your needs. If the latter, state what didn't work for you as specifically as possible so that future potential students can more accurately evaluate that teacher. Likewise for positive reviews. The more detailed you make your review, the more it will help others.

Finally, once you find one or more teachers you like, consider purchasing a lessons package as this is often cheaper.

Advancing from a Plateau

Many language learners spend time on a proficiency plateau, often at the upper intermediate level. You have made significant progress, but you are having trouble moving to the next level. These plateaus can demotivate and demoralize.

Cher Hale, writing on the *Fluent in 3 Months* site,[143] summarizes the findings of an interesting study by Jack C. Richards of Cambridge University[144] that attempts to answer the question, what keeps intermediate learners from becoming fluent? Here is how you may hit walls in your language project.

Your vocabulary has a limited range

A plateau in vocabulary development often manifests itself in overuse of lower-level vocabulary, a failure to add more advanced level vocabulary, and limited awareness of collocational usage. Collocation refers to restrictions on how

words can be used together, such as which prepositions are used with particular verbs, or which verbs and nouns are used together. Knowledge of collocations is vital for effective language use and a sentence that is grammatically correct will look or sound awkward if you don't use collocational preferences. For example, we can say "blond hair" but not "blond car", "lean meat" but not "slim meat", "perform a play" but not "perform a meeting."

Besides collocational preferences, try to gain an arsenal of proverbs, idioms, or phrases to make your conversation more colorful and understandable.

In terms of the quantitative dimension of vocabulary learning, learners often plateau at around 3,000 words. You need 5,000 to 6,000 to reach the top of the intermediate level and be ready for an advanced level.

You can't distinguish between the multiple meanings of one word

Polysemy refers to one word having multiple meanings. For example, "head" in English can mean the head of a person, the head of a pin, or the head of an organization. Similarly, "to tell" in English can mean tell a story, tell something to someone, tell two things apart, tell a lie, etc.

You are not using more complex grammar tenses

You might be conversational and able to hold your own, but you're not aware of how to use the complex grammar tenses that are necessary for more in-depth expression. For example, if you have mastered the present and past tenses and are comfortable using them, once you encounter the perfect tense, your linguistic system has to be revised to accommodate new distinctions communicated by that form.

You continue to make errors that were never corrected

Fossilization refers to errors in speech that persist despite progress in other areas of language development. Fossilization may be linked to an emphasis on communication at the expense of accuracy. Programs with an extensive use of "authentic communication," particularly in the early stages of learning, reported that students often develop fluency at the expense of accuracy, resulting in learners with good communication skills but a poor command of grammar and a high level of fossilization. Fossilized errors tend not to affect our understanding of the speaker, although they might be irritating or even stigmatized, since they often reflect errors that are typical of basic-level learners. Since fossilized errors rarely cause misunderstanding and hence do not prompt the listener to ask for a clarification, you may never notice them. If this describes you, try to monitor your language production through listening or viewing recordings of your speech.

Alternatively, have others monitor your speech for fossilized errors in focused listening sessions.

Your reading and listening are good but you're not confident speaking

Recent theories of second language acquisition no longer assume productive skills will arise naturally from comprehension skills. Two other factors are necessary if we are to reduce the gap between receptive and productive competence: *noticing* and *focused output*. Noticing refers to the idea that we won't learn anything from input we hear and understand unless we notice something about the input. Consciousness of features of the input can serve as a trigger, which activates the process of incorporating new linguistic features into your language competence. In particular, we distinguish between *input* (what we hear) and *intake* (what we notice). Only intake can serve as the basis for language development. Focused output refers to the obvious notion that practice makes perfect.

Language production may be adequate but often lacks the characteristics of natural speech

Your language usage may be productive yet unnatural. Many factors contribute to the naturalness of speech, but an important one is the extent to which you are using multiword chunks, as well as conversational routines or fixed expressions. Words do not occur together in speech in random patterns, but often occur as multiple words that are used together. These may be two, three, four, five, or even six-word chunks.

For example, why do we say, "Nice to meet you?" when we meet someone for the first time, but not "To meet you is nice?" Both have the same meaning, but we say the former and not the latter. Our linguistic or grammatical competence provides the basis for creating many ways of saying things, but only a small subset of possible utterances is ever actually said.

Native speakers have a repertoire of thousands of these routines or "chunks," and their use in relevant situations creates conversations that sound natural and native-like, but you have to learn and use them as fixed expressions.

You sound like a textbook

A common problem is learning an academic version of your target language. It may be grammatically correct, but you're missing the warmth that comes with a common, everyday language spoken between people of a common country.

You're not comparing yourself to native speakers to see where you stack up

Comparing yourself to others is often detrimental in life, but for language learning, studies have shown that it's a great way to shorten your learning curve.

Learning Products and Software

There is a wide difference of opinion on the value—both educationally and financially—of language learning products and services. Whether using such options is worthwhile depends on your personal circumstances. How do you prefer to learn? What is your current level? What are your learning goals? How much are you willing to spend to learn the language?

Financial value is an important consideration for many. One way to consider value is to compare the cost of the products you would like to purchase to alternatives you plan to replace with them. For example, replacing an in-person course with a product or online service—even an expensive one—might be a good value. Of course, regardless of the price, you will waste your money if whatever you choose isn't effective.

Another issue to consider is your personal discipline. There are so many free study materials available on the Internet and I have discussed many ways to find language exchange partners. So, it might be ridiculous to some people to spend money to learn something that a dedicated, disciplined person could learn for free. Of course, not everyone is so disciplined. For many, paid products will bridge the gap. For others it will just sit on the shelf unused. Understand your own level of discipline before deciding.

Below, I list popular multi-language products on the market today (in alphabetical order). Most are paid products, but I have included some free options as well.

50 Languages book2

book2[145] (books in 2 languages) by 50 Languages has 100 lessons for 50+ languages that provide beginners with a basic vocabulary. With no prior knowledge, you will learn to speak short sentences in real-world situations. The book2 method combines audio and text for effective language learning.

Books accompanying the audio files are inexpensive and will supplement your language learning.

The 100 lessons help you learn to use a language in various situations (e.g., in a hotel or restaurant, on a vacation, small talk, getting to know people, shopping, at the doctor, at the bank). You can download the audio files and listen to them anywhere.

Pricing: You can download all materials for free or pay for paperback versions of the books, usually for $14.95.

Assimil

Assimil[146] is a French company founded by Alphonse Chérel in 1929. It creates and publishes foreign language courses, which began with their first book *Anglais Sans Peine* ("English Without Toil"). Since then, Assimil has expanded into many other languages and continues to publish today. Their method for teaching foreign languages is through listening to recordings and reading a book with the text that you are listening to, one side native language, one side foreign

language. This method focuses on learning complete sentences, for an organic learning of the grammar. It begins with a long passive phase of only reading and listening and eventually adds active exercises. Most books contain around 100 lessons, with the active phase starting on Lesson 50. Assimil is useful for the type of learner who enjoys reading and places more importance on passive listening and reading skills than active skills.

Pricing: Ranges from €4.90 for the audio to a phrase book to €49.90 for a full course. Some languages have specialty products, like *Business French*, for example, which are priced separately.

Babbel

Babbel[147] offers lessons in 14 languages: English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese (Brazilian), Polish, Russian, Dutch, Turkish, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Indonesian. From what I have read, it is best for beginner to lower intermediate level study. The system determines your level and suggests courses that correspond

to your interests and knowledge. Your skills are honed by carrying out different tasks, such as completing sentences with missing words, translating, placing words in order, and replicating phrases and words. Babbel's lessons are quiz-styled and use audio, pictures and words to help you with the grammar and vocabulary. There is also a speech recognition feature, but current reviews say it is not good.

Pricing: $12.95 for one month, $8.95 per month ($26.85) for three months, $7.45 per month ($44.70) for six months, $6.95 per month ($83.40) for a year.

Berlitz Flex

Berlitz[148] is one of the oldest learning companies in the market. It is more well-known for its phrase books and in-person and online courses but now offers its Flex program, an online subscription course combining interactive self-study learning tools—including speech recognition and interactive instructor videos—with 20 personalized one-on-one coaching sessions with language experts. Lessons and coaching sessions are delivered in the target language only and

activities are based on realistic scenarios. You are exposed to a variety of accents and cultures from different instructors. Your learning progress is tracked and synced across devices. At the moment, Flex is only available for English, French, German, and Spanish.

Pricing: A 6-month subscription is $129.83 per month ($778.98 total) and a 12-month subscription is $116.58 per month ($1,398.96 total). The website says a subscription includes 20 coaching sessions but doesn't say whether that is the same for both the 6-month and 12-month options or if you get 20 sessions per 6 months.

Busuu

Busuu[149] offers twelve different language courses—English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, Russian, Japanese, Arabic, Turkish and Polish—covering reading, writing, listening, speaking from beginner to upper intermediate level. You can sign up for free but you will need a premium membership to unlock most features, including advanced grammar lessons, offline mode, McGraw-

Hill Education certification (Beginner A1, Elementary A2, Intermediate B1, or Upper Intermediate B2), the study plan, and the vocabulary trainer. You can share your exercises with native speakers who will give you valuable feedback and you can correct other Busuu learners in your native language. Find friends on Busuu and send and receive exercises to/from these friends (you cannot search for a specific friend, but the app often suggests friends you can add from the Social tab).

Each lesson is designed around a useful topic, and includes vocabulary, grammar, and practice exercises which gradually build conversational and writing skills. Busuu teaches you all the language you need before asking you to form sentences, have a conversation, or do a writing exercise. Each lesson repeats language you've learned in earlier lessons, reinforcing your memory and building your confidence.

You can visually track your progress through the course by seeing your percentage completion score increase and

observing the color of each unit you complete changing. In addition, you will receive a weekly progress report which tells you what you have achieved in the past seven days.

Pricing: Basic plan is free; Premium plan is €9.99 per month (€5.83 per month if annual); Premium Plus is €10.99 per month (€6.66 per month if annual).

Duolingo

Duolingo[150] offers courses in 35+ languages for free (with ads) or you can pay for a premium account to remove the ads, get offline access and enjoy extra features. The app works especially well for people who prefer structure, sequential learning, and gamification. One reason it has become so popular is that the quick lessons let you complete exercises whenever you have a few minutes to kill. Duolingo is excellent for beginners but less so for more advanced students.

Pricing: Free account gets all learning content with ads; $6.99 per month gets Duolingo Plus with no ads and extra features.

eLanguage Learn to Speak

eLanguage Learn to Speak[151] has programs for only four languages: English, French, German, and Spanish. Developed by leading language experts and university professors, it uses a listen and repeat model with a speech recognition and analysis approach that gives instant feedback on how to improve your pronunciation. You can choose any of the 41 lessons you want. The Deluxe product line claims to offer the equivalent curriculum to two years at a university level, but reviews claim that it mostly focuses on vocabulary for travel with little grammar exposure or other learning options. Also note that the software only supports Windows and there are no mobile apps at the moment.

Pricing: $29.95 per language for the audio course and $49.95 per language for the Deluxe course.

Fluenz

Fluenz[152] offers programs for Spanish, French, German, Italian, Mandarin, and Portuguese. The Fluenz approach started by finding and then leveraging similarities between the

target language and English, crafting hours and hours of common-sense explanations in English, and teaching learners how to build their own sentences in the target language. Depending on which program you choose, there are two to five levels of study, with thirty lessons on each level. These lessons mimic a classroom and are led by a tutor.

Pricing: Depends on the language and number of modules. For example, one module of Spanish is $187, two modules are $258, three modules are $308 or $320 (different levels), and five modules are $398.

Foreign Service Institute (FSI)

FSI Language Courses[153] is the home for language courses which were developed by the Foreign Service Institute and are now in the public domain. There are textbooks for learning each language on offer and some languages include associated audio components.

Pricing: Free

Glossika

Glossika[154] uses smart technology, an adaptive learning algorithm, and structured content to help you speak better and faster. Covering 60+ languages and providing customized content based on your level, Glossika uses full sentence practice in context, meaning your vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar acquisition are more natural. You'll "train" a language in four key skills integrated with spaced repetition. Each language on Glossika has an extensive collection of authentic sentences recorded by native speakers.

Pricing: $30 per month ($24.99 per month if purchased yearly).

Language 101

Language 101[155] claims to base its program on neuroscience not marketing, but details on this or the method itself are slim. Or perhaps the method is explained fully, but it's not much of a "method" at all. As far as I can tell, it's just a glorified—and expensive—vocabulary training program that uses SRS. Their point of differentiation is that you get two

translations for each word or phrase, the real meaning and the literal or word-for-word translation. They also claim to use gamification whereby you study with points and compete with other users on a leaderboard that ranks the top ten users of the day by study time. There are no downloads (mobile or otherwise); you just use the website. Language courses come in three levels.

Pricing: A single package for one language is $297, all three levels for one language are $597, and a super package with all languages is $797. Each includes lifetime access and can be used by up to five people.

Language Transfer

Language Transfer[156] offers nine free language courses via SoundCloud and/or mobile apps. Not only are there no price tags to access the material, but there are no advertisements, no sign-ins and nobody asking for or selling your data. Language Transfer runs on donations. Current languages include Arabic, English for Spanish speakers, French, Greek, German, Italian, Spanish, Swahili, and Turkish.

Mango Languages

Mango Languages[157] covers 70+ languages, focusing on practical conversation skills for common traveler situations, especially words and phrases that will be the most valuable in common, real-life situations. Each lesson covers four key language components—vocabulary (taught through conversation rather than just a list), pronunciation (includes the ability to record your voice and see how your pronunciation compares to the narrator's), grammar, and culture. Lessons involve a rich mix of listening and reading activities, so you can make sense of written and spoken contexts. A simplified learning environment presents content structure, review progress, and learning activities front and center, while streamlined navigation encourages you to explore different topics in your target language. Intelligent algorithms are active behind the scenes, and give you a personalized review experience that adapts to your progress and learning behaviors.

Pricing: $7.99 per month ($79.99 for one year) for one language, $17.99 per month ($179.99 for one year) for all languages.

Note: Since Mango sells to libraries, a nearby library may have a copy you can use for free. On the site you can even find a library locator.[158]

Michel Thomas

Michel Thomas[159] is available for 18 languages: Arabic (Egyptian and Modern Standard), Dutch, French, Greek, German, Hindi, Italian, Irish, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Chinese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish. It is an audio-only course. No games, videos, PC or online interactivity. The audio is presented with a tutor and two students to emulate a live classroom environment. A downloadable transcript of the audio is available. Each course is short. For example, the introductory Japanese course is only eight hours, and the intermediate is 15-20 hours.

Pricing: Varies depending on the level and the language chosen. Usually, a bundle of levels is offered for

a discounted price. For example, the Foundation Japanese course is $100, the Intermediate Japanese course is $90 and a bundle of the two is $152. The Spanish bundle (five courses) is $273.

Mimic Method

Mimic Method[160] is an approach developed by language trainer Idahosa Ness to teach language learners the sound system of their new language. The aim of the Mimic Method is to teach this "by ear" method to learning a language so you can improve your pronunciation and accent and sound more like a native speaker. The course doesn't teach grammar or vocabulary. Rather, it teaches the sounds of the language. The course breaks a language into its elemental sounds. The glaring drawback for this course is that you don't get feedback to determine proficiency. Another potential concern is that the focus is on syllables instead of combined sounds.

Note: Free, but registration is required.

Mondly

Mondly[161] offers fun, easy and effective language courses designed by language experts for 41 languages. With 1,000+ language combinations, you can learn from your native language. Other features include: a chatbot that uses voice recognition to simulate conversations; 50 topics to prepare you for the most common situations; 36 vocabulary builders to install words fast; 41 conversations to give you fluency; grammar features and conjugation tables to shortcut your progress; and quick Daily Lessons for constant improvement. There is a gamification element to the app. A nice touch is the daily reminders sent to you as notifications. The Mondly review at *Fluent in 3 Months*[162] notes that learning grammar is a weak point of the app, as is learning new writing scripts. Mondly also may not be the best choice for more advanced students (intermediate or above); its strength is in vocabulary building, audio (real voice actors), voice recognition, and the overall user experience.

Pricing: There is a free but limited version; Premium versions are $9.99 per month for one language or $47.99 per year ($4 per month) for all languages.

Open University

Open Learn[163] is a platform from Open University offering various online language courses for free. Languages include Chinese, English, French, Gaelic, German, Italian, Spanish, and Welsh. There are also courses on linguistics and a "How to learn a language"[164] course. There are three different types of courses: eBooks, Badged courses, and Lunchtime learning. Multi-level courses are covered in three levels. Courses last different amounts of time and you can work through them at your own pace.

Pricing: Free, but registration is required.

Pimsleur

Pimsleur[165] is a self-study program covering 50+ languages based on the method established nearly 50 years ago by Dr. Paul Pimsleur. That system is based on graduated

interval recall (like SRS), the principle of anticipation (asking for understanding, pausing for a response, and then reinforcing the correct response), core vocabulary (prioritizing common words), and organic learning (introducing introduced within the context of a conversation or exchange). The program used to be completely audio-based, but it seems to have modernized in recent years with mobile apps that add reading, digital flashcards, role-playing challenges and games, and cultural connections. Benny at *Fluent in 3 Months* offers a good review of the Pimsleur method.[166]

Pricing: There are usually five levels for each language, each with 30 lessons. Some languages have only one level and for those you can buy 5 lessons for $21.95. For all languages, you can buy a 30-lesson level for $150 or buy all levels for $575.

Rocket Languages

Rocket Languages[167] covers 13 languages: Arabic, ASL, English, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Some languages

have three levels and the others less. Rocket focuses on offering a course filled with games and activities, but according to one review, the program lacks a clear or complete approach to actually learning a language. The lessons are basic and consist mostly of hearing an English sentence, then the same sentence in the target language, and then a space for you to repeat before hearing the sentence in the target language again. This is hardly breakthrough learning science. Apparently, the program excels in marking progress and offering evaluative tests and it does claim to use voice recognition for pronunciation practice and writing lessons for script languages.

Pricing: Depends on the number of levels. For example, Level 1 is $99.95, Levels 1 & 2 are $249.90, and Levels 1, 2 & 3 are $259.90.

Rosetta Stone

Rosetta Stone[168] is one of the oldest and best-known language products, available for 25 languages. It relies primarily on using the connections that your brain makes

between pictures and words, but you can also learn new vocabulary by reading stories and get instant feedback to fine-tune your pronunciation with the TruAccent® speech engine. Rosetta Stone will create a game plan with curated content and reminders to help you stay on track based on why you're learning your new language. Native-speaking coaches can help you along the way. Your lessons sync across your desktop, tablet or smartphone and all languages include a phrase book with downloadable audio companion lessons.

Rosetta Stone has a lot of fans and a lot of critics. Critics argue that it's just glorified flashcards, is only good for beginners, and grammar is not given any importance. The program has undergone some big changes in recent years, so I am not sure if these and other criticisms are still valid. The price has also dropped, so it might be a less expensive option worth trying now.

Pricing: There is a free trial and you can purchase monthly access to any single language for $11.99 with either a 3 months or 12 months plan. Alternatively, you

can get lifetime access to all languages for $299 (note that you may find it much cheaper on Amazon; it was $99 for one year and $179 for lifetime access when I checked).

Speed Learning Languages

The United States government developed the Speed Learning Languages[169] course to find the best method of teaching diplomats and government officials a foreign language. It's only available for Chinese (Mandarin), French, German, Italian, and Spanish. There are over 90 hours of study via audio lessons with accompanying text, covering four levels. From what I can gather, this program is excellent and very thorough, but also requires more discipline to use. Thus, if you are looking for a more interactive and fun experience, this might not be it.

Pricing: A two-unit lesson and practice collection is $197, though two collections (four of each) are often on sale for the same $197 price.

Transparent Language Online

Transparent Language Online[170] offers a learning experience for 100+ languages to meet your specific goals, whether that's beginner alphabet courses, professional-level lessons, or skills-based practice. The program lets you incorporate real-world language into your studies and review it strategically so you can put it to use when you need it. Set a daily goal, whether it's 10 minutes or an hour, and the program will hold you to it. Run an activity report to keep track of your efforts and earn course certificates to prove it. You can add your own vocabulary to your custom repository of Learned Vocab while spaced repetition algorithms will make sure you're reviewing vocabulary that you're at risk of forgetting. You can even combine your self-guided studies with a virtual live instruction add-on to put what you're learning to use.

Pricing: $24.95 per month ($149.95 annual) for one language and $49.95 ($249.95 annual) for all languages. Note that many libraries carry it for free. Also note that

you can pay extra for live instruction: $79 for a 2-session package, $299 for an 8-session package, or $1,899 for a 12-week live instruction course.

Learning in Other Ways

In an article about learning Spanish,[171] Lukas Gohl offers a few good ideas for learning a language in less traditional ways. In particular, try taking a non-language class that is offered only in the language you are trying to learn. Spanish guitar? Dance classes? Capoeira? Ikebana? This is easier if you are traveling or living in a place that speaks your target language, but sometimes it is possible in other places as well.

Is there a large group of native speakers (for example, a large immigrant community) where you live? If so, consider volunteering or working with an organization that works with this target demographic.

In "The Most Effective Method for Learning a Language Alone,"[172] Dave MacLeod explains his system for studying languages. First, find an audio recording in your target language that has a corresponding text version. Book/audiobook combinations are ideal. Then, you listen to

the audio over and over, writing what you hear and checking it with the written version for accuracy.

Miscellaneous Learning Tips

Below are some potentially useful language learning tips.

- Depending on the language you are trying to learn and your previous experience learning languages, you may wish to consider "meta" issues. For example, if your new language uses a different writing system, would you prefer to learn it at the beginning or wait until after you gain some competence using the language? If there are unfamiliar sounds, how much time and effort do you want to spend mastering these before moving on?

- Unless you have an urgent need to achieve your goals, don't start off with an ambitious study routine or you may risk burning out. Instead, start with a modest daily routine and gradually increase it.

- Study in chunked sessions. Your ability to retain information diminishes after 25-30 minutes, so break it

up into multiple, smaller sessions. Reward yourself with fun activities during your breaks. Having said that, studying intensively—say four hours a day for two weeks —will be more beneficial than studying one hour a day for two months. That's because language requires a lot of repetition, a lot of reference experiences, and a consistent commitment and investment.

- When selecting learning materials, look for interesting content that matches with your language learning goals. Make sure it includes a listening component and is at a suitable level.

- Consider both recognition and recollection. Recognition requires a trigger for you to remember something. Study with a focus on recollection. Quiz yourself and don't just glance over highlighted notes.

- Learn how to talk about language. For example, "how do you say X?" is one of the most important sentences you can learn, so study it early and use it often. Other

useful phrases include, "how do you spell that?", "what is this called?", "can you say that again?", "can you speak more slowly?", etc.

- Look for "shortcuts." For example, some languages use prefixes and suffixes, so learning these can speed up your vocabulary acquisition. For example, words that end in "-tion" in English will usually end in "-ción" in Spanish and "-ção" in Portuguese. Likewise, a language like Spanish has general rules or principles that can help you remember a word's gender. There will be exceptions, but it will be much easier to learn the rule and exceptions than each word separately.

- If you have questions about, or you are struggling with, a grammar rule, try searching on YouTube as many online teachers and schools are now posting useful reference videos.

- Find a way to interact in your target language daily, even if you don't live somewhere it is spoken.

- Challenge yourself to think in your target language. Try to switch the language for those inner monologues that run in your head. Practice making sentences and fake conversations for any expected conversations. This will lead to much easier communication when you have them.

- Choose resources (free and/or paid) and study systems that suit your learning preferences.

- Don't get discouraged by your mistakes, but embrace them instead, and try to have confidence while using your target language.

- We all have language strengths and weaknesses. In the early days, focus on your strengths and later focus on your weaknesses.

- Expose yourself to massive doses of speech—and perhaps writing—that you can understand, while gradually increasing the difficulty level.

- Don't get frustrated by what you don't know. Instead, look for ways to express yourself by using words and grammar you know. Do this by putting yourself in speaking situations that are challenging and try to use only your target language. Ask for feedback or help from others.

- Learn about the culture and customs of the places that speak your new language.

- Change the language on your electronic devices (OS and/or favorite programs) and your social media accounts to help you learn new vocabulary and stop thinking only in English.

- Write everything you hear when studying. The act of writing helps cement information in our brains, so do so while studying, especially when listening to your target language.

- Consider the four Fs of learning[173]: **focus** on what you want to learn and try to be **fast**, **frequent**, and **flexible** in

your learning.

- Try to develop the habit of studying when you have small chunks of time. For example, fire up the flashcard program on your phone when you are waiting in a long line, riding the train, waiting to meet a friend, etc. And, try to make a habit of the time and length of your study. For example, 15 minutes every morning before you leave for work or school. Habits are how we get productive.

- Match your study materials to your schedule. Try to have multiple study options and materials that take different amounts of time so you can mix and match. Try to plan your schedule to use the materials that take longer and use downtime to squeeze in the options that take less time.

- If you are fluent or at an advanced level in a third language, get a two-way "cross-dictionary" between your two non-native languages (e.g., French to Italian dictionary) instead of one in your native tongue.

- Extend your threshold of uncertainty. Knowing why something is the way it is in a language can be helpful, but sometimes—especially as a beginner—this wish to know why can slow your learning. To some degree, this is a personality issue, but with experience and patience you can learn to curb your need to know why all the time or, at least, learn when to heed it.

- Reddit[174] is a forum and community-based discussion website where members can submit content and vote on others' submissions. It's a hugely popular platform with many "subreddits" or different language communities that you can join. There's no standard naming method to help find relevant subreddit communities, but many use the format "learn" plus the relevant language (e.g., "learnthai").

- Besides Reddit, you can probably find at least one thriving Facebook group for your target language.

Language Learning Sites and Resources

I have already listed some useful websites that can help with your language learning efforts. Before listing the rest, here are my three absolute must-use websites.

1. Google Translate,[175] like any electronic translation service, is imperfect. Still, as a basic dictionary and a more robust translator, it is invaluable when trying to read and write in your target language. I especially appreciate how it will remember several languages you might work with frequently and how you can quickly switch between languages. Its pronunciation tool is often useful as well, as is the inclusion of virtual keyboards and transliteration to script conversion typing (on the desktop version). The voice input on mobile versions is a time saver and a great way to test your pronunciation.

2. WordReference[176] is a fantastic site. It is part dictionary, part forum. Native speakers (Spanish is especially well represented) monitor the forums so you can ask for word usage clarifications. This is especially helpful as sometimes, according to the dictionary, there are multiple ways to say something when, in practice, certain words or phrases cannot always be used in all circumstances. When you search for a word on WordReference, first you will see the dictionary result and, below, any forum threads that reference that word. Before posting your own question, do a search as someone has likely already asked your question.

3. Verb Conjugators. This isn't one site in particular, as you will have to research the best site for your target language. But, when trying to learn a language, it is often the verbs that give us the most trouble. For those languages where verbs get conjugated, a good conjugation tool can really aid your efforts. I personally like Conjuga-me[177] for Portuguese verbs and 123 TeachMe[178] for

Spanish verbs. If you need a place to begin, check out Verbix[179] which can conjugate verbs in more than 60 languages.

Dictionaries and Translation Tools

As I mentioned above, I love Google Translate and WordReference. An alternative to Google for translating entire webpages is Lingro.com,[180] which takes any web page and makes all the words clickable. When you click a word, the translation pops up. You can save any word to a list for future study. For my Japanese studies, I like Rikai.com[181] and POPJisyo[182] for translating entire pages or large chunks of text. These days, some of the best and most convenient dictionaries are mobile apps. You'll need to research the best ones for your target language, but I can recommend SpanishDict[183] for Spanish; imiwa?[184] (iOS only), Midori[185] (iOS only), JED[186] (Android only, no longer being developed but still works), or Jisho[187] (Web only) for Japanese; Pleco[188]

for Chinese; and Talking Thai[189] (mobile only) or Thai-language.com[190] for Thai.

Language-Specific Sites

This is a bit of self-promotion, but I run two websites for language learners. The first, *Yookoso!*,[191] is for those trying to learn Japanese. It offers three things: a curated (and vast) collection of the best resources available online, a place to access my personal notes from the Japanese courses I have taken over the years, and mailing lists and RSS feeds to receive a new kanji character or mini grammar lesson each day.

The second site I run, *dado que*,[192] is for Spanish language learners. Like *Yookoso!*, it offers a hand-selected directory of useful resources, and it also has some of my class notes. In addition, you will find the entertaining and useful novel, *Noche Oscura en Lima, Peru*,[193] and a complete grammar guide.[194]

Undoubtedly, every language has some sites catered specifically to its learners, but listing those here is impractical, so do an online search to see what you can find.

Blogs and Other Sites about Learning Languages

Many people blog about learning languages rather than about one specific language. This is a partial listing in alphabetical order.

- *AJATT*[195] by khatzumoto

- *Confessions of a Language Addict*[196] (archives[197] maintained separately)

- *Create Your World Books*[198] by Susanna Zaraysky

- *Fluent in 3 Months*[199] by Benny Lewis

- *Foreign Language Expertise*[200] by Alexander Arguelles

- Laoshu 505000 YouTube Channel[201] and Laoshu 505000 Facebook Page[202] by Moses McCormick

- *Growing Participator Approach*[203]

- *I Will Teach You a Language*[204] (podcast) by Olly Richards

- *Language Learning Tips*[205] by David Bolton

- *Language Mastery*[206] by John Fotheringham

- Lindsay Williams[207] (YouTube)

- *Lingua Frankly*[208] by Nìall Beag

- Lucas Lampariello[209] (YouTube)

- Olly Richards[210] (YouTube)

- *Omniglot*[211]

- Richard Simcott[212] (YouTube)

- Steve Kaufmann (YouTube,[213] Blog[214])

- *The Fluent Show*[215] (podcast) by Kerstin Cable and Lindsay Williams

- *The Mezzofanti Guild*[216]

- *The Yearlyglot*[217]

Articles about Learning a Language

Besides the specific articles I referenced previously and the helpful language learning advice you can find on the blogs I have listed, here are weightier articles and books in case you are interested in knowing more than a casual amount about language learning.

- "A Few Simple Ideas for New Language Learners… and old ones needing some new life,"[218] by Ambrose Thomson, Angela Thomson, Chad Thomson, Greg Thomson

- "Building a Corpus of Comprehensible Text,"[219] by Greg Thomson

- "Commentary: You're not studying, you're just…,"[220] by Ravi Purushotma

- "I Learned to Speak Four Languages in a Few Years: Here's How,"[221] by Gabriel Wyner

- "Kick-starting Your Language Learning: Becoming a basic speaker through fun and games inside a secure nest,"[222] by Greg Thomson

- *Language Learning and Technology*[223] (a refereed journal for second and foreign language scholars and educators)

- "Language Learning in the Real World for Non-beginners,"[224] by Greg Thomson

- "Leave me alone! Can't you see I'm learning your language?"[225], by Greg Thomson

- "Lessons learned from 50 years of theory and practice in government language teaching,"[226] by F. H. Jackson & M. A. Kaplan

- LinguaTrek *Natural Language Learning* e-Book[227] by David Snopek

- "New ways to learn a foreign language,"[228] by R. A. Hall Jr. (1973)

- "On the mortality of language learning methods,"[229] by Wilfried Decoo

- Peace Corps Volunteer On-going Language Learning Manual[230]

- *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*[231] by Dr. Stephen Krashen

- "Ways to Approach Language Learning,"[232] by Carol J. Orwig

Please Review This Book

Thanks for reading! I spent a lot of time researching and writing this book and I hope you found it helpful. If so, can I ask a favor?

Would you please leave a review? It would mean a lot to me personally and will help with the visibility and ranking of the book online. Plus, a review will help potential readers.

Not sure what to write? No need to overthink it. Even a line or two would be appreciated, though details about specific information you found helpful would be great.

If you don't like the idea of leaving a negative review but want to share some constructive criticism or complaints about anything—content, formatting, editing—feel free to send me an email at jmblum@liseries.com.

If you don't want to track down the link to leave a review, you can find it at:

liseries.com/how-to-learn-a-language/

T H A N K S!

About the Author

Jeff Blum is a location independent entrepreneur specializing in the curation of online information focused on the fields of business, travel, language, productivity, and technology. He runs numerous websites under the corporate umbrella Equinox Enterprises LLC. He also offers consulting services to entrepreneurs and fast-growing small businesses.

Jeff has been traveling extensively since March 2009. In his previous, non-nomadic life, he worked in both startups and Fortune 500 companies. He has worked in a variety of positions: engineering, finance, marketing, strategy, operations, and human resources. He also once taught English in rural Japan.

Jeff studied electrical engineering, political science and economics at the University of Rochester in New York and received his MBA from the University of Texas at Austin.

You can connect with Jeff on:

LinkedIn: linkedin.com/in/jmblum

Twitter (personal): `twitter.com/jmblum`

Twitter (business focus): `twitter.com/mbadepot`

Twitter (travel focus): `twitter.com/lengthytravel`

liseries.com

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