

# The Language Hacking Guide



by  
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## INTRODUCTION

When I turned 21, the only language I spoke was *English*. I had taken German and Irish in school, but received low grades in both. This meant that I considered myself totally untalented in languages and simply accepted that I would never speak anything but English my entire life. My university studies were in Electronic Engineering.

However, I moved to Spain after graduation and loved the culture so much that I decided I wanted to get to know it better by understanding the actual people from Spain – and not just those who spoke English.

Over six months, I tried quite a lot of things to learn Spanish, mostly only casually, and mostly just using standard courses. After all this time I still only had a few scattered words, phrases and grammar rules – not very useful. Then one day I decided to **really** devote myself to the project and tried some unconventional approaches never recommended in most courses.

Thus, *Language Hacking* was born!

I'm certainly not the only language hacker out there. Many others before me have learned languages quickly too. I have met a lot of these people in my travels and learned loads from them, and have even included interviews in this guide with some of the Internet's most well-known language learners to hear what they have to say about approaches that have helped them learn many languages more quickly and more efficiently than the average learner.

This guide includes some of the most important lessons learned on my language journey to date. In sharing my struggles, I hope to spare other language learners from the frustrations I went through to get to this point. Too many people spend years learning a language without even being able to converse beyond the basics, and I want to help them.

I'm proposing that you can start speaking the language *immediately*, and in a matter of months, you can speak it *very well* if you learn it the right way. The contents of this guide share some of the many *free* possibilities and methods available to anyone who wishes to quickly reach the stage of being able to converse with natives in a foreign language, whether abroad or in your home town.



The feeling of truly understanding a culture by being able to talk to the actual people in that culture is within many people's reach. I hope the advice in these pages (and audio) will help you to achieve that dream!

## Part Three

# Communicating from day one



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# When will I be ready to speak the language?

## Part Three Communicating from day one

In talking with other experienced language learners (check out the interviews with some famous polyglots included with the guide to confirm this), I've found that some things I talk about a lot like a good attitude, certain study techniques, etc... are common to quite a lot of efficient language learners.

However, there are some issues we may disagree on, and one of them is *when* you should start speaking. Other people have been successful in language learning by waiting before they speak, but from what I can tell most of them make progress **much slower** than I would because of this. Luckily there are exceptions. One of the interviewees, Moses McCormick, has also been successful in learning by speaking from day one.

The issue comes with the sense of feeling *ready*. It's logical to think that if you don't have enough basic vocabulary and at least rudimentary grammar and a tiny understanding of responses then you are simply not *ready* yet to speak the language.

Well, yeah... but then when you have all of this there is still some fine-tuning to get rid of your grammar mistakes and learn expressions, slang, and improving your accent. So should you wait until you have these until you are ready?

Perhaps... but then you *still* don't have an ideal ability to write formally and use precisely the right words, and there are cultural references like TV shows and music that you won't be familiar with yet.



## Part Three Communicating from day one

Can you see where I'm going here? With the right amount of logic you will **never be ready** to speak. The sad thing is, quite a lot of people I meet are in this frame of mind. I can honestly tell you that I have come across people with a vastly deeper understanding of how a particular language works than I would have, and yet I speak more and speak better than they do.

The sense of perfectionism that I've mentioned before does nothing to help because you can never reach it. You will never be *one hundred percent* ready to speak a language.

When I ask these other learners when exactly they *are* ready, I get unsatisfactory, vague responses like “*you'll know it when it comes*” and I think this encourages people to wait even longer.

So, in case you can't tell, I think you are ready to speak the language **FROM DAY ONE**. This has been why I have been able to speak languages quicker – because I *start speaking them earlier*.

The way I see it, this is nothing more than pure mathematics. If you speak more, then even in the same time-frame you'll improve your conversation skills more than others would, simply because you are practising more.

One criticism of this is “fossilisation” of mistakes. Since you will obviously be making many mistakes, there is a worry that you will simply never unlearn them and speak that way forever. I think this is a gross simplification of how intelligent people are.

Being slightly harder to get rid of these mistakes more than compensates for the speed at which you will actually be able to *communicate*.

In this part of the [Language Hacking Guide](#) I describe in great detail how you can apply some clever techniques to make sure that you too can speak from day one, and get along very well with natives, no matter what your level may be or how confident you may feel!

**SUMMARY:** Get rid of this concept of “ready” and start speaking immediately.

# Part Five

# Learning resources



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# Using music to remember phrases

## Part Five Learning resources

One drawback to the method above is that it is more ideal for very small sets of words – usually one or two. After this, when you try to learn entire phrases, it gets more complicated to bring them together.

I can tell you that one resource I like to use, and recommend to people, to be able to communicate in the *very early* (i.e. first day on) stages of speaking a language is *a travel phrase book*. It's not a great long term solution, but a good phrase book can be extremely useful to be able to produce full sentences to express yourself. Another alternative is finding a small group of basic phrases online and writing them down or importing them to your phone to study.

My personal favourite is the *Lonely Planet* phrasebook series, due to its wide range of quite useful basic phrases – unfortunately, it applies a mostly standard template for all languages, but covers most of what you might need to say, anyway. These kinds of phrasebooks give you entire sentences to express essential concepts, which you would not get very quickly by studying the language systematically to understand the underlying grammar.

But *how* do you learn these phrases? They are strange strings of pronunciations that may not resemble your native language. Image associations have their potential here – making a chain of images for each word, for example, but it does get to be too much work at first when you are not too worried about understanding key words *just yet* and want to just say the whole phrase.

So, the *second* technique I use is adding **music** into phrases that you need to learn. Bear with on this one! I'm not suggesting you turn your entire day into a Broadway musical. (Although if I ever figure out how that would be practical to language learning, I will suggest it to people, simply because the world would be more fun that way!)

Most people would, once again, use repetition to get these phrases into their mind. In this case, I do it too, but combine it with music and an association. The three different approaches together give me a very easy to remember sentence, even if it's quite long!



## Part Five Learning resources

Association is important for the *first word/part* of the sentence. Even if you don't understand the word itself, try to make an association with just this first part for the concept you wish to recall. So for example, to remember that *Dove si trova il gabinetto* is Italian for “Where is the toilet?” you can take just the first part *Dove* (pronounced doh-vay) and think of a *duvet* (almost pronounced the same, as *doo-vay*) being used as a giant's toilet paper, or a toilet made out of bed covers, etc. As far as the word is concerned this is not very useful, because “dove” actually means *where*. But to temporarily remember the entire phrase it's a good start, and if you use it for a few phrases you'll start to naturally remember this word as meaning *where* without any associations.

Now that you have the first word to start with so you can snap it out of the air in an instant, it's time to add some music! I don't mean just speak musically (in this example, as Italians may be more famous for), I mean *sing it*. Think of any random tune – for example Big Ben's chime (before the dongs), or the intro to a song you like, etc. and *sing the phrase* to this tune.

You can repeat this a few times to help it sink into memory, but it will be *way more fun* when repeating it with a tune. As well as this, you have another dimension of a possible association to use if you are using a specific tune.

If I did go with Big Ben here, for example (of course, this particular tune *is* used for other bells! But I personally associate it with Big Ben), with my giant's example, then I'd picture the Big Ben being used sideways (rather than upright) as a the toilet paper holder, with a giant *duvet* hanging over it. Since Big Ben is in the association, I'd remember the tune and the words would come so much easier, especially if I sang the phrase to myself a few times. Sing it with me! ♪ *Dove si trova...♪ il gabinetto* ♪. Can you hear it? In my head both the two syllables sets “-ve si” and “etto” are on the same note so the typical part of the tune fits perfectly with the phrase.

Overall this may take no longer than 20–30 seconds to read the phrase, come up with the associations, and sing it to yourself a few times. It will take longer at first as you try to get your mind used to recreating the extent of imagination you would have had as a child, but then it will come back to you naturally! When you get really quick you can do this in even less time!

Of course, you don't need to *actually* sing the phrase when the time comes to say it to a native, but in the time you use to recall it (the “uhm...” period that you will now be *replacing* with conversational connectors like “Excuse me” or “Can I ask you a question?” or alternatively using



body language to show that you are about to say something etc.) you will bring up the association for the first word and tune and sing it out in your mind and then remember the phrase itself to speak it as normally.

After doing this two or three times you can actually abandon all associations and the entire phrase will come to you instantly. Music can be a huge help in learning languages – I also try to study song lyrics and sing along, and the vocabulary in them comes to me much quicker because of this.

## Part Five Learning resources



## WANT TO READ MORE?

If you enjoyed this preview copy, then check out more details for getting your hands on the full version, and all the extras included (multiple full translations, worksheets, free updates etc.) [on the fluent in 3 months blog](#). The full version also includes the following interviews:

- Khatzumoto from All Japanese All the Time. Khatz learned enough Japanese to work professionally in the language in **just a year and a half**, *before even going to Japan*. I had a 42 minute chat with him to hear more about his immersion approach that does not even require travel.
- Professor Alexander Arguelles, who has devoted his entire adult life to studying languages and can read an impressive number of languages and converse in several others. Interview time: 43 minutes.
- Moses McCormick who lives in Columbus, Ohio, but knows over 40 languages, including many African and Asian ones, nearly all of which he has learned from home! We were talking for 44 minutes.
- Scott H Young– my case study! He has been applying a lot of my suggestions (as explained on my blog) over his year abroad in France and reached an impressive level of French (his first foreign language). He explains how he adapted some of my advice to his own interesting learning strategies, and how he managed to implement my many suggestions over a realistic time period. Interview time: 29 minutes.
- Damien Elmes – programmer of the *Anki* application mentioned in this guide and on the blog. He explains to us how the SRS method works. Interview time: 17 minutes.