

The Language Hacking Guide



by
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Benny (Brendan) Lewis. I'm a vegetarian from Cavan, Ireland and I don't drink. I like to think of myself a "technomad" -- a full-time technology-enabled globe-trotter.

I have had plenty of other jobs in the last decade such as English teacher, Mathematics teacher, French/Spanish teacher, photographer, youth hostel receptionist, tour guide, yoga store manager, first aid assistant, electronic engineer and several others. Before attempting to support myself from sales of this guide, I was a location independent freelance translator.

My goal is to earn enough from sales, and from [private language coaching](#), to hopefully eventually be able to live comfortably in Moscow and Tokyo, each one for 3 months (and unfortunately, the two most expensive capital cities in the world!) to learn Russian and Japanese. Until then, I will continue choosing cheap destinations for my 3-month language missions.

I am sure that the contents of this book, translations, worksheets and interviews can help you a lot, as these ideas have completely changed my life over the last decade and opened up a whole new amazing world of language learning and communication with people across the world.

Thank you so much for your purchase and enjoy hacking your target language!



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 One

Mentality



Part One Mentality

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and learning a language is quite a trip!

You have obviously made the most important decision of all in this journey – the **commitment** to learn, but where you go from here depends on so many factors.

I've gone through the process several times over the last decade, and made some good decisions (and some really bad ones) in terms of speaking languages. I've learned from all of these, and continue to learn from them.

In this guide, I'll be outlining precisely what has enabled me to learn a new language and achieve fluency in that language in a very short amount of time.

I'm writing the guide as if I were talking to *me* as a 21-year-old; uncomfortable with strangers, not confident in my abilities in many things, and above all – convinced I would never speak a foreign language.

My journey over the last seven years has been an amazing one (and it continues) and I wouldn't change what I experienced for anything. But it would have been a lot easier and more fun if I had access to the information in this guide. I'd have wasted less time too.

Being open to learning how to speak a language fluently in a short period of time is not just a matter of which study materials you use or how much you learn, but is largely influenced by your **attitude and motivation**.

To prepare yourself to make huge strides in a language, you absolutely must have the right mentality. The best learning techniques in the world and most expensive courses would *and have been* wasted on people with the wrong mentality.



Motivation

Part One Mentality

Just *wanting* to learn a language isn't enough.

Sorry to break it to you, but pretty much everyone in the world would be quite happy to speak a foreign language if it required no work. In fact, I don't think that I have *ever* met someone who doesn't “want” to speak another language.

With nothing more than a *casual interest*, you have little chance of achieving much in a short time. I have come across countless expats and people on summer study programmes who achieve nothing impressive over months or years of exposure to a language.

This is because they *don't need to*. They use their native tongue (e.g. English) with all of their friends, with their boy/girlfriend or husband/wife/children, in all of their e-mails, reading all of their books and watching all of their TV shows and movies (downloaded or otherwise).

Expats are often not fully immersed in the language/culture overseas, which is why they don't learn despite months or years of exposure. But this is good news for language learners who **don't** live in countries where their target language is spoken!

If expats can create a language bubble for themselves abroad to preserve their native language, why can't the rest of us create language bubbles at home to learn a new language?

The answer is simple – you don't want it *that* much. For example, speaking Spanish with your boy/girlfriend who will join you on a trip to South America soon isn't “necessary”, because it's easier to speak the language both of you are used to. It would be *weird* to do otherwise.

One of the biggest revelations I made in learning a language was this idea of **changing the want aspect to be a need**. How I did this myself in the real world is something I'll get into later. But for the moment, it's important to appreciate the crucial difference.



When you **need** to speak a language, it's more than just casually hoping to speak it someday. It's a **genuine desire** to have that language completely fill up your life and even take it over. This level of investment is not something casual learners are familiar with.

Part One Mentality

SUMMARY:

Change your *want* mentality to a *need* mentality



Why are you learning this language?

Part One Mentality

There are many reasons why someone may want to speak a language, and these vary depending on the person.

Maybe you want to discover your roots? You have a passion for travel? You want to pass an exam? Or maybe you are just very interested in languages and in expanding your horizons.

These are excellent long-term motivators, but to be honest they are *not* going to help you reach fluency quickly.

Each one of these reasons are *vague*, and with no specific (or a very distant) time limit. You may have one big reason that simply cannot be broken down into achievable chunks, and this makes it impossible to measure your progress

This is why I don't actually aim for the end-goal (for me, usually fluency). Instead, I create **very short-term** projects that are realistic and give me a sense of progress and achievement.

This creates pressure and a **need** to achieve something tangible in the short term. This need is simply not present in most language courses. Examinations are a somewhat useful way to create a need, but most academic courses are not actually tied to realistic use of the language. Impressive grammar and vocabulary still don't mean you can actually communicate, and I have come across many people with high academic levels in a language who still feel unprepared to speak.

Even though my end-goal might be something along the lines of “fluent in three months”, my short-term aims are things like “buy a SIM card this afternoon”, “learn words related to the Internet so I can attend a talk on Wikipedia and get the gist of it”, or “be able to get from the airport to my hotel using no English”.



These aims do *not* require months of investment. They are very specific and can be prepared for in just a few hours once starting to learn a language, using techniques I'll discuss later.

If you achieve your aim, it doesn't matter if you stumble, pause, don't understand everything, or even frustrate the other person (which has happened to me very rarely and I'll explain how you can avoid this). *You will have achieved what you aimed for.*

Part One Mentality

SUMMARY:

Have practical short-term aims with your language



Making sure you have a good first impression

Part One Mentality

You may think (especially if you have attended certain academic, and even modern software/online courses) that learning a language mostly involves two things: grammar and vocabulary. This is false.

In my opinion, the most important aspect of being able to speak a language is your *confidence* in your ability to use the language.

You can come up with technical reasons why German or Chinese or Swedish or Russian or whatever is the “hardest” language in the world, but this is a waste of time. It doesn't matter what language you take on, it will be the hardest language for *you* if you keep focusing precisely on what makes it hard. It will always be *as hard as you think it is*.

I have met countless people who are potentially way more “naturally” intelligent than I am, and yet they make little progress in a second language because all they ever do is list the reasons holding them back from speaking it.

They constantly focus on these unpleasant points, so their attitude towards the language is totally messed up. A language hacker does the exact opposite and focuses on the positive from the start.

Part One Mentality

To illustrate the point, imagine this:

I am going to introduce you to a friend of mine, but I tell you a bit about him first. Just before I introduce you, I say that he hates children, is opinionated, he farts when he's nervous and has a really annoying laugh. All of this may be true, but it would be very mean of me to do that and ruin his chance to make his own first impression. It also means that you are going to be a bit apprehensive and maybe not so interested in getting to know him, since you already know some of these annoying things about him.

Then I go to someone else and tell him about the same guy – I say that he works for NASA, is very kind, has a great sense of humour, and has some interesting stories about travelling through Africa working for charities, all of which would also be true. In this case, my friend would be well-received and would be an instant hit. Eventually, new friends of his would discover some of the annoying parts of his personality, but *they'll accept these* as just part of the package of what this person is. They will accept these faults as all *friends* do.

Why can't we do the same thing for languages?

I look at a language as a *friend* I want to get to know better, rather than an enemy I have to conquer. I find any excuse to make “him” look good, and I will defend his honour if he is insulted. In the last part of this guide I list reasons why certain aspects of languages (vocabulary, genders etc.) are *easy* to learn. These languages are my friends and I want you to see the good side of them.

For example, if you tell me that French is too hard because it has masculine and feminine nouns, I'll tell you that it's easy because it has a vast amount of vocabulary the same as in English, and counter your argument by saying that word-endings makes remembering masculine and feminine pretty straightforward.

If you tell me some Asian languages have strange tone rules, I'll tell you that they aren't that bad if you look at them specifically to see how they can be easy, and I'll continue to say that they (mostly) don't have cases, noun genders, conjugations, adjective agreement, complicated word orders, or some other difficult feature as found in other languages.



And in *those other languages* I'll give you reasons why those features aren't that bad. Whatever it takes to portray the language I'm currently interested in as *not that hard*. If you make fun of my friend behind his back, then I will defend him as any good friend would. If you want your target language to be your friend, you need to treat it like one!

This has been a major reason for my success in learning languages quickly, and most people looking at it from the outside will presume that you are simply smarter than them because *to you* the language is easy. But this is a shift in mentality, *not* a shift in IQ.

Part One Mentality

SUMMARY:

Stop thinking about how hard your target language is; that will get you nowhere! Focus on the positive!



But I'll make mistakes!

Part One Mentality

The “hard” aspects of a language certainly cannot be ignored. This is why I suggest looking at them differently and appreciating them.

However, no matter how you look at languages, it takes time to get used to aspects that are different from your mother tongue. This means that making mistakes is *inevitable*.

If you accept this, then *in the early stages* you don't even have to worry so much about knowing the hardest part of a language. It's much better to get a feel for it, as it is used, rather than a feel for its *grammar*.

For example, if an English learner ignored subject/object differences and said, *That phone call is for 'I'* (rather than 'me'), I could definitely forgive him if he had only been learning English for a few weeks. In fact, I'd be impressed that he was saying *anything* considering the little time investment.

Your focus should be on *getting your point across* and understanding *most* of what is said back to you.

If the above learner spent months learning grammar *first* and after six months knew to say “me” rather than “I”, he would not have achieved anything greater in terms of communication. He may be speaking *better*, but saying an incorrect sentence after one week of studying at least means that he is **communicating** despite the little time investment.

Communication is what a language is for after all! Even if you are ultimately studying for an examination, if you don't appreciate this point, then it's only a list of grammar rules and vocabulary tables. That's not a language; language is a means of communicating with people, and even if you don't do it 100 percent perfectly at first, you can certainly still communicate.



So, **make mistakes** and don't worry about it! You can't learn to walk confidently if you don't stumble a little first.

It's also essential to use mistakes as an opportunity to learn, and *not* as an obstacle. I like to simply 'edit' out the mistakes from my memory if I have indeed learned from them – this way I see the path behind me as nothing more than progress.

Part One Mentality

SUMMARY: Mistakes are a natural part of the learning process, accept that they will happen and know that this will not prevent you from communicating.



The right attitude

Part One Mentality

In years of learning languages, I have come across a *lot* of other learners and seen some of them learn much quicker than I had. I have, of course, learned huge amounts from them.

Unfortunately, quite a lot of people I have come across don't seem to be succeeding in learning languages at all (or a guide like this wouldn't need to be written). And you know what? I've learned a lot from them too. I've learned precisely how you should *not* learn a language.

You know what nearly all of them have in common? They focus on the negative aspects of the language they are learning. Their glass (or more appropriately, their language) is half empty instead of being half full.

Sorry if that sounds like I'm simplifying things too much, but I honestly believe this is one of the biggest differences between successful and unsuccessful language learners. Being realistic is important, but *language slackers* (the opposite of *language hackers*) focus on these details almost to the level of an obsession.

Language slackers will find very imaginative ways of justifying why the language learning challenge is not possible for them. They will give you a list of reasons that hold them back (or *you* back if they are “generous” enough to share this negativity when they hear of your project), and when they see someone achieve what they claim is impossible, then they will dismiss that person as an *exception* or as a genius. This is nothing short of laziness.

When they list different parts of a language (the many cases of Slavic languages, gender in Latin languages, tones in Asian languages, etc.) they will remind you how hard these are. And you know what? Technically they are right – work is indeed involved in learning these aspects that you are not familiar with and the glass *is indeed* half empty. That is not a falsehood.



Part One Mentality

They can even go further and provide evidence to back up their proof of how hard it is. For example, they personally tried to study a language in school for over a decade and don't speak it, so learning a language quickly is not possible. Technically they aren't "wrong".

Even if they tell you the language you are learning is the "hardest in the world" they aren't wrong! Every language *is* the hardest one in the world if you look at it that way. "Hard" is relative – like big or beautiful – and depend on the observer.

But using this weird logic and being obsessed with how hard it is will not help you to actually achieve anything. So, of course, I'm suggesting that your glass be half full. Optimism and a positive attitude are crucial aspects to language hacking.

I don't tend to label issues in a language as *difficult* – they are just *different*. And since a language is my *friend* I will go further and tell you how great it is, as outlined above.

"Bad news" will come your way, and you have to learn how to filter this for essential facts rather than *opinions* of level of difficulty.

For example, when I heard that Czech had seven cases, I *could* have spent a lot of time whining about those *damn* cases (and I have met a lot of people who do take this approach). But that **doesn't help**! I promise you, no amount of complaining will ever bring you closer to fluency. It's a pity it doesn't, because a lot of people are excellent complainers.

Anything that holds you back from progress needs to be eliminated, and being pessimistic is high on that list!

With Czech, I just thought "oh well!" and I spoke with the wrong case at first, but I studied to improve, and looked for patterns to help make studying easier.

And you know what? I got through it and was pretty confidently able to use the seven cases in conversations.

This is another reason why I tend to focus very little on grammar in the early stages. Seeing how much work needs to be done is intimidating – I jump straight into speaking (aware that I'm making plenty of mistakes) and come to grammar a little later. And you know what happens? It's



no longer a scary monster that needs to be slain, it's actually *interesting* because I'm familiar with it.

Making grammar more fun in my own way ensures that as I progress, I feel positive about it the entire time. This positivity creates a snowball effect to provide consistent momentum to guarantee that I will continue to improve.

Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right – Henry Ford

Part One Mentality



Not being born naturally talented

Part One Mentality

This is yet another very popular mentality that holds people back from trying to learn languages: the fact that they *aren't talented enough*, or that they aren't lucky enough to be rich/smart/free.

It's very easy to look at someone like me, or many others, who have successfully learned to speak foreign languages and dismiss us as *naturally talented* or *lucky*. In fact, I did the very same thing myself *until I really tried* to actually learn a language. Now I have a very different concept of what talent and luck mean.

You can tell me all about genetics and background advantages, but at the end of the day *no matter what excuse you can come up with*, someone has overcome it before you, and successfully achieved their dreams. The difference is that these people kept *really* trying or thought of clever ways to get around their issues. Most of their secrets are not so secret, you just have to find their story or discover your own path.

As an example, let me quickly tell you the true story of someone with incredible setbacks, who still managed to learn French, German, Greek, and Latin and achieve a hell of a lot more.

She was born in Alabama, U.S.A. in 1880 and went to the Radcliffe College, the women's branch of Harvard. Back then, most women were not expected to ever leave their town or do anything more than get married and raise kids, and anything else probably would have been even less common in Alabama.

As well as this, she went on to write a book that was translated to 25 languages, met every U.S. president in her lifetime and become a close friend to Alexander Graham Bell and Mark Twain.

Quite the accomplishments, right? It's easy to think that she must have been born lucky – most people would never achieve these kinds of things, especially as a woman in her time. Maybe she was *just lucky*?



Part One Mentality

Hardly. She achieved all of this and more despite being **deaf and blind** from the age of eighteen months and could barely talk. Her name was *Helen Keller*.

Can you imagine how difficult her struggle must have been? I definitely couldn't even begin to dream of ever being able to relate to it. Her inspirational story shows that rather than telling herself that she was a victim and constantly reminding herself how unfair her life was – as many people would have done in her situation – she lived an incredible life and achieved some amazing things. Like all humans she would have had her weak moments, but she went on despite them.

No matter *what* is holding you back, you can overcome it.

Whenever I have this nagging doubt that one of my dreams is “impossible”, such as speaking a foreign language that I'm completely unfamiliar with or travelling with very little money, etc. I think of people like her who achieved much more against way more insurmountable odds and how *pathetic* my excuses are in comparison. There are hundreds of examples, and every problem has a solution if you are innovative enough. The issue isn't the problem itself, it's the person facing it and how serious they are about overcoming it.

I don't care what your excuse is, if you are devoted enough you **will** find a way around it.

This is all part of the change in perspective that has helped me make so much progress in languages in recent years. Rather than categorise people as lucky or unlucky, talented or untalented, you have to see how *you* can achieve what those 'lucky' people have.

Sometimes they *do* have actual advantages that make it easier, but that's their story, not yours. You happen to have certain advantages that millions of other people don't. You can find your own path to any goal, and fluency in a language is definitely one of them. There are no lucky horseshoes, stars aligning, or witchcraft etc. at play here.

Later in the guide I give a few examples of suggestions for getting around typical problems, like not having enough time, joining in on conversations despite not speaking much, etc.

However, if you have your own nagging doubts (married with children, in too much debt, failed languages in school etc.) that you think will hold you back, then think to yourself how likely it is that someone else has faced the same issue as you before but found a way around it.



SUMMARY: Using luck, talent or genes is *not* a good excuse. You can overcome challenges to reach your goal.

Part One Mentality

Part Two

Plan of action





Mission

Part Two Plan of action

My end-goal usually tends to be *fluency*, or sometimes (more recently) *accent reduction*. But to start off, most people would be more than happy to aim for basic or intermediate level conversation skills first.

However, no matter what you are aiming for you need a *plan of action*. Rather than a *New Year's resolution* or, even worse, an *I'd like to* or *I hope to*, I have **missions**.

This is more than just a change of words; a mission is an urgent plan-of-action to achieve your target, and the process involved is completely different.

I'm sure you've had many tasks you may have aimed for before; give up smoking, join the gym, stop watching TV, use the stairs rather than the elevator, etc. Some of these imply a dramatic change in habit and many people don't realise how hard this is to maintain.

There are some interesting tips on 30-day trials in the audio interview with Scott Young, so check that out for another perspective on changing broader seemingly difficult tasks into smaller, more achievable chunks.

The problem with an objective like *speak fluently in three months / six months / a year* is that it is too vague and none have any strategy incorporated in them. I've met a lot of people with New Year's resolutions to speak Spanish/French,... etc. by the end of the year and they almost never achieve it.

This is because they haven't defined *speak*, and because the *end of the year* is so far away that they can constantly leave doing any work until "later", and even if they make it a shorter timespan, they still might just be doing nothing more than telling themselves that they'd *like* to.

You **need** a strategy. This guide gives you some advice in particular strategies that have worked for me, but there have been a huge amount of language learners that have done it in very



Part Two

Plan of action

different other clever ways (such as Khatzumoto, whom I've also interviewed). What we all have in common is not necessarily the strategies themselves, but the fact that we HAVE them. We all have a plan and we stick to it. Even someone with an *inefficient* strategy (and let's face it, no strategy is perfect) will achieve so much more than someone with the best ideas that never get implemented.

If you read this entire guide and listen to all of the interviews and come away with a *sense* of what is involved in learning a language, then I feel like nothing important will actually have been achieved. You need to *apply* these. I'm serious!

Right now, **make a plan** of the next months and the realistic objectives you want to achieve in your language. Do you want to be able to understand most of what is said in TV shows within six months? Write it down! Want to be able to make it up to at least 20 seconds into a conversation with a native and still be able to continue confidently? Write it down!

There are a couple of exercises I've included in the worksheet with this guide that should help you, and this is one of them. Print it out or copy it by hand, but don't just do it on your computer. Having something written down and on the desk or in your pocket can be an excellent reminder to keep you working towards those goals.

I'm all about technology, but having something in the physical world makes a huge difference. That sheet of paper with my list of objectives that I have cello-taped to my table is not going away, even when I shut off my PC.

If you haven't started writing already, why are you still reading this? You should have written down your goals by now! I'm not joking, start it now and add to it or refine it if you see something else in this guide, but *be clear about what you're aiming for*.

Summary:

All the best ideas in the world are worth nothing if they aren't implemented.



Steps needed

Part Two Plan of action

Once you have the end-goal in mind, the way you can come up with your strategy is to *break it up* into the components needed to reach it.

See the end-goal as a definite. It simply *will happen*, so *work backwards* to see the logical steps needed that would have helped you reach that goal. Get rid of this idea of *maybe* and work to make it happen.

Taking the example I mentioned above, if you want to understand TV shows, you need to make sure that listening is the focus of your mission. Maybe you'll jump straight in and listen to native TV series from the start and force yourself to sink or swim (this method has been effective for Khatzumoto, in the interviews), or maybe you'll listen to materials prepared for language learners to ease yourself in, get used to slower speech, and start (I personally mix both up, which by no means is “better”, it has just been the most enjoyable way for me). Each of these approaches has its own advantages and reasons, but what's important is the fact that you are genuinely devoted to it.

For the deep-end approach, you need to set aside time *every day* to expose yourself to the language as much as possible, and make sure you are doing something active to increase your understanding. Have the TV shows downloaded or recorded, waiting to be watched so there are no excuses to miss a single session.

For the gradual approach, you need to have the materials ready and be *even more devoted* to make sure you can get through them quickly. Basic, very slowly spoken audio does a poor job at helping you understand real and natural speech, but when its difficulty is increased incrementally but quickly it can help a lot. Make the overall time shorter by doing it intensively (since what you are doing is easier) so you start practising on your end-goal (watching TV) long before the deadline.



This is just one example; whatever your end-goal is, break it up into the steps involved so that you know you will make progress **every day**.

When you have a time set aside every day, then you can go to the next step of MINI-GOALS.

Part Two

Plan of action



Mini-goals

Part Two Plan of action

A mini-goal is a target that you can achieve *in one sitting* (or standing, as the case may be)!

The problem with aiming to speak well *some day*, or even *this time next year* is that it is too distant to feel real and can therefore easily be ignored. You need deadlines, even if they are within your own mind. And the best deadlines are *looming ones*. You can't really get less distant than TODAY.

Rather than aiming to *eventually* have a good scope of vocabulary, learn all words related to body parts (for example) within *30 minutes*. What has been very effective for me is having a very conspicuous countdown timer – if I'm working on my computer, 25 percent of the entire screen is just the digital countdown, with the seconds constantly flashing at me, lest I forget!

Rather than aiming to eliminate your accent, work on rolling your 'r' for the next three days, studying tongue positions, repeating training videos on Youtube and getting natives to correct you (in person or via Skype).

These are parts that eventually add up to achieving your end-goal, and they are *very much* achievable if you put in that short-term devotion. It's easy to dismiss people as language geniuses, but all they are doing is a *large amount* of these **easy** tasks. When brought together, all MINI-GOALS will add to the end-goal when planned out correctly, but each task individually is *very much achievable* by anyone else.

With a very efficient strategy and genuine devotion to the project, your *hopes* become a mission.

Summary:

Break up your monthly/weekly plans into smaller chunks that can be achieved immediately



Defining your targets

Part Two Plan of action

One of the most important aspects of your mission is to be very specific about what you are aiming for. You want to understand the radio? Not good enough – say that you want to understand at least half of what is being said and be able to explain it to someone afterwards.

Perhaps you want to be able to *get by* for your first week in a country? This is a fine target to aim for but once again, the vagueness makes it too fuzzy to aim for – be specific! You specifically want to have the phrases for asking directions/ordering food etc... getting a useful gist of responses, the ability to remember some basic words, or whatever else you plan on.

If you cannot describe your target in great detail, it is not a target – it is nothing more than a fuzzy cloud and that will *not* help you if you want a plan of action to reach it.

Having a short answer for brevity is fine, but you must know what this means to yourself. For example, I tend to aim for *fluency* in a language. This is the quick one-word answer I give people. However, I have a very specific definition of what this means to me and try to make sure other people do, at least to themselves.

If you happen to be aiming for fluency too, you may fall down the trap that many people do and imagine it to be equal to *perfection*. Aiming for perfection is a **mistake** because by its very nature you will never reach it. It is discouraging and unhelpful to have a target so vague and high that you will simply never get there.

So, what does fluency mean to me? Of course, different people define this word in different ways. But as far as I'm concerned it is *nothing* like speaking perfectly, being equivalent to a native, or being able to talk about *any topic* in your target language.

I can't talk about “*any topic*” in *English*, so you can bet I don't aim to do so in other languages. As nice as that would be, it's unrealistic and unnecessary. If girls talk about shoes or if architects talk



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about baroque building styles, both will use vocabulary I don't understand (brand names and technical terminology), and despite these setbacks I can still claim to speak English as a native. I can also admit that if it weren't for automatic spell-checking, this document would have quite a lot of mistakes in it. If perfection isn't possible for natives, then why should us humble language learners be aiming for it?

To me, “fluent” can be broken down until it's something I can aim for. Starting with the official definition (I like to use the Oxford English dictionary):

1 speaking or writing in an articulate and natural manner.

2 (of a language) used easily and accurately.

As you can see, this doesn't imply any perfection or native-equivalence. *Used easily and accurately* is something that us mere humans can indeed aim for.

To be even more specific, I consider myself speaking fluently if I can get my point across while making very few mistakes (but still making mistakes), understand almost everything said to me in normal conversations, and follow natives speaking amongst one another when not talking about very specific topics that I generally wouldn't talk about in my native language.

To me, fluency is perhaps 90–95 percent “perfect”, and that is an excellent level to reach and to be very proud of. That extra 5+ percent is not necessary for most people, especially in the short term. I aim to reduce that as much as possible over the long term, but in less than a year 90 percent perfect is very much achievable if you are devoted enough.

If the language project is your full time devotion, you can do this in a short number of months.

So when you are defining your language learning goals you need to be as specific as possible: number of months, precisely what basic conversation / intermediate / fluent means *to you*, number of seconds you aim to chat to someone without asking what a word means – whatever you are aiming for, *define it*.

If you just try to learn a language without knowing precisely where you are going and what you need to focus on (Speaking? Listening? Reading? Understanding? Confidence to speak?) then it will be very hard to get there. “Speak *language x* well” is *not* a target and doesn't allow for any plan of



action. If you have a destination in mind, then you can have a path to bring you there and focus on a good strategy to make sure it happens.

So what are you *really* aiming for? Worksheet 2 requests a precise definition. Write as much as possible!

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Make a language log

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A lot of what I discuss in this guide is based on over seven years of applied language learning, but there are some aspects that I have learned even in the last year.

One of them is that success comes much easier if you have a *language log*. This is to document your progress in a language, and share your struggle with others who are experiencing similar problems. When you go through your journey alone, it is much easier to lose track of the goal and even your motivation.

Being “public” about your mission gives you that extra edge of pressure if you blog about it. If many people eventually start to read your blog, it adds an extra dimension to your strategy by making sure you have some news to post when you update them.

Again, I'll say that simply reading this guide and listening to the audio won't get you very far unless you *apply what is suggested*. So, once again I'll suggest that **right now** you start a language log (a.k.a. a blog). Go to <http://www.wordpress.com>, click “sign up now” to get a free account, think of an interesting name for the blog (based on the language objective – this isn't a space to share Youtube cat videos!) and when you are in the main screen of the dashboard (after logging in) write a “new post” to make your introduction post something similar to the answer you gave in the worksheet for defining what you were aiming for. You can do all of this in just a couple of minutes.

If privacy really is an issue, then start a written journal or open a new word processing document to record your journey, but commit yourself to updating it consistently. The main problem with doing it this way however, is the lack of feedback and possible encouragement you could get from a blog. To make sure more people come to check it out, write some interesting things you have discovered in your language learning journey that can help others. That is basically what I have been doing to make sure that I have others helping me with my difficult tasks. If it weren't



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for my blog, I would not have been so successful in making huge leaps of progress in the last year.

Before that year I made pretty good progress, but it was less committed at times because I'd get lazy. *Now*, when the temptation is there to just take a week off, I remember that my big monthly update is coming up in a few days and I have to have something to show for it! I have also mentioned particular difficulties I have been having and got fantastic responses and links to amazing resources that have greatly improved how quickly and efficiently I have learned.

The amount of readers doesn't matter. There were only a few dozen people looking at my blog in its initial weeks and that was more than enough people I didn't want to let down. How do you get these people to read your blog? Go comment on their blogs. This brings the extra advantage of exposing you to someone else's story.

Don't worry about being a "good writer" – just write as you would speak. I could have started my blog years ago, but didn't because I thought that how my English teacher graded me eleven years ago affected how well I express myself now.

So is your language log ready? Have you already made your first entry? No? OK, I'll wait...

...

I'm still waiting – don't worry, I'm not going anywhere! Minimise this window or put aside the printed document and go to your computer, then go to the above link or your other preference for starting a language log, and write the first entry.

Done now? Good!

With the positive attitude, plan of action, and platform to make a log of your progress, you are all set.

I think I have given you enough pep-talk, it's time to start actually getting into your language!! In the next section I'll tell you why *and how* you can speak a language from day one of trying.

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When will I be ready to speak the language?

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A lot of what I've discovered that I share with you in this guide is actually “common sense” from many language learners' perspectives. I've found in talking with other experienced language learners (check out the interviews with some famous polyglots included with the guide to confirm this) 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 slower than I would because of this. 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?

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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.

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.

It is indeed harder to get used to saying certain parts of a language differently if you are used to saying them a particular way – and this is the main advantage of waiting to speak that I see, since you will get used to saying them correctly from the first time that you say them.

Despite this, being harder to get rid of these mistakes more than compensates for the speed at which you will actually be able to *communicate*.



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



A language is more than input and output

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It's very important to realise that *communication* is the whole point of speaking a language! Not impressing people with how well you've memorised your table of conjugations, or using precisely the right word when another one will convey the same message just as well, or even thinking that being exposed to enough over a long enough time will mean that you can speak it. If you want to be able to speak a language then you have to focus on the reason the language exists in the first place.

It exists for communication.

So this begs the question of *how* you can speak if you don't *know* anything?

There is this idea of being able to reduce any complex system into inputs and outputs – I did it all the time as an engineer for illustrative purposes to represent electronic devices.

I'm surprised to see that people do this for humans who are learning languages, and they seem to represent the whole process as follows, which to me is a ridiculous simplification of reality:

1. Take one human who has zero ability to communicate in the foreign language.
2. Add input to that human in the form of vocabulary and grammar, or lots of passive exposure from the foreign language, to prepare them.
3. Repeat step 2 for a very long time (years or decades).
4. 'One day' said human will be able to speak at a satisfactory level.



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It's very tempting to believe this, as it is a more *common sense* way of looking at learning a language for a lot of people. You simply **cannot** say something if you have never heard it before. You *need* input to be able to produce output. You can't speak so soon after starting because there is so much you have not learned yet.

Following this logic, if someone *were* to speak a language in their first week they are simply a *genius* or have some magic formula for getting all the vocabulary and grammar they need at unrealistic speeds.

I don't have this magic formula and I'm not a genius. I can assure you that after my first week, I am still missing out on a HUGE amount of the core of what it takes to speak a language well. And yet, I have been successful in communicating almost entirely in that language several times.

That's because I don't see the system as it is represented above. I am not a box waiting for input to come into me so I can produce the output. I am not simply “human with no language X”, and neither are you.

You *already have* a head start. It is impossible to truly start learning any language “from zero”.

Sometimes, the reasons you can communicate quicker are very obvious. English speakers have a large number of words they'll recognise in many languages (that I will explain more in the last part of the guide) and there are similarities between many other languages.

It was easier for me to speak Italian my first week in Italy because I had already learned Spanish, which is quite similar. It was easier for me to start speaking German because I had learned some in school.

However, there have been other times when I have had no familiarity with the language and yet was still been able to communicate *a lot* in the initial stages.

For example, in my first week in Prague I managed to do most of what I needed in Czech, with no previous studies. After a few weeks of lazy studies of Thai, the one weekend that I actually tried



to speak it was *not that bad* and I managed to do quite a few basic things in the language, even though I was only trying to speak for a day or two in total. The way I was able to do this stemmed not from focusing what I *didn't* know, but (as mentioned in the first section) to focus on what I *did* know. Before even starting I have **way** more “input” already waiting within me than the above description suggests.

In this section I will give you several ideas to show you that you can indeed communicate quite effectively in your first week of learning a language!

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Non-verbal communication

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When people say that we should learn languages like babies do, due to the more natural process involved, I mostly agree with that, and most of this guide promotes that kind of process. However, there is one huge difference between adults and babies – adults *already know* how to communicate with others. *The vast majority* of these means of communication are *international* and are **non-verbal**.

You simply cannot belittle the importance of non-verbal communication methods that you have learned up to now, in helping to ease the initial stages of speaking a language you are otherwise unfamiliar with.

One study at UCLA suggests that up to 93 percent of communication to express feelings and attitudes, for example, is determined by non-verbal cues. More specifically, seven percent is determined by the words used, 38 percent by voice quality/intonation/volume etc., and 55 percent by non-verbal communication.

It's hard to be so precise, but *about* seven percent of communication being from the actual words you use is impressively small. Of course, that seven percent sometimes conveys the absolutely most essential body of communication, but I make sure that I'm as “fluent” as possible in the other 93 percent to make sure that I have an edge. This statistic is specific to expressing feelings and attitudes, but a lot of other aspects of communication would follow similar patterns.

This *edge* is the secret to learning languages much quicker in my opinion. It's looking *outside the box* of the path to fluency, and especially the initial ability to speak as being simply acquiring vocabulary, grammar, and exposure to a language. Sorry to sound so flowery (excuse me while I hug this tree.... OK, back!) but this *edge* is the **human aspect** of languages that is hugely ignored by most people who view it as an almost robotic “input vs output” issue.



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The above does not mean that I mime and dance what I want to say, but it does mean that I can express what I need to say almost without ever needing to use English, even the *first day* I attempt to speak a language. In the next section, I will give several examples to illustrate this.

But first, try to imagine what I might mean by non-verbal communication. The most obvious one is of course expressing it with your body. Don't know the word for "drink"? Mime yourself drinking a glass of invisible water/beer. Want to show that you don't like something? Make a grimacing expression on your face and turn your head away from it in disgust. This one tends to be international as that is how babies generally react out of instinct.

Yes, I know there are examples of certain signs not being international – up-down nods being equivalent to shaking your head in the Balkans, thumbs up being inappropriate and equivalent to the middle finger in others etc... but the *vast majority* of unspoken communication is common to **all** cultures.

I'm sure some people can answer that by giving me a list of further examples, but that is still in the *half-empty* mode that I mentioned in the first section. Sure, there are differences, but the vast majority are the same.

Body language, posture, eye gaze, facial expressions, gestures, touching (shoulders/hands/pat on back, etc.), changing the *tone* and *volume* of the words you are saying – there are a host of ways we communicate ourselves that are independent of the words we use.

A warm smile to ease the initial awkwardness, a bark mimic to show that you are talking about a dog, a frown and look of discomfort while pointing at a part of your body to indicate that you are in pain – you don't need words for any of this.

I'm not saying that these are flexible enough to *replace* actual verbal communication in any way, but it's important to note that you are **not** starting from zero. You are not a box waiting for input. You are a human being, already able to communicate yourself in many ways, just needing to *refine* how you would do it better in that culture/language.

Now it's time to give some examples!



How to communicate with natives with very little learned

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“OK, enough theory!” I hear you cry! It's time to show you what I mean.

Before I've committed anything to memory, I usually have a phrasebook in my pocket for my first few weeks in a country. This allows me to look up what I want to say and repeat it to myself just before saying it. (“Which way to...?” “Can I have a please”, etc.) I get into more detail on how I remember these unfamiliar phrases for longer in the Resources section.

This is somewhat outside of input/output, since you are basically just reading aloud what your book says without necessarily understanding the sentence structure and core words. As long as you read the suggested phonetics well enough, or have a basic understanding of tones. (for non-European languages) you can say something somewhat resembling what you wanted to say to the native.

With a detailed enough phrasebook and dictionary (or application on your smartphone) as long as you look it up before you say it, there is a huge amount you can communicate this way, especially if you accept that you will say it with mistakes, or need to rely on saying single words.

This is, of course, not useful for the long-term, but is one of the key features that allows me to get into speaking a language immediately. It may be quite artificial, but I *am* communicating entirely in the language using this “cheat”. I also look up likely (single word or phrase responses) I will hear back to make sure that I get the gist of the response. Of course, you can't have conversations this way, but you can definitely get by, and that is a pretty good place to be on your first day.



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On my first day in any country, I can do everything essential that I want to do with a phrasebook and a reasonably good dictionary to fill in missing words. I won't have complete sentences, but I can express all basic and crucial information using these books just as a temporary crutch. If you need to ask a few questions, try to memorise the phrases. (More on that later.)

This example shows that you can, indeed, communicate (even though it's very limited) in the language with no focused input. Your input goes to output immediately. You can do this to certain degrees in many languages, especially those closer to your own language.

European languages, which don't present word-distinguishing tone issues, make this extra-simple. You can ask *any* question imaginable, armed with only a transcript of how the sentence should be read aloud (as most phrasebooks tend to have). You won't sound elegant and your accent will be obvious, but you'll be *communicating*.

If you aren't going to reach “perfection” after 30 years of studies, then why do you need it on your first day?

The next examples show the importance of *context* and *extrapolation*. Not necessarily *unvoiced* forms of communication, but crucial aspects of the mechanisms that go on in your mind behind communication, independent of “how much” of the language you have learned. Just thinking a little bit has helped me many times much more than learning tables of nominative/accusative/dative. cases ever would have.

My *first day* in Berlin, still struggling to turn my wasted high-school level into something useful, I wanted to buy a SIM-card for my iPhone. I wanted to make sure 3G Internet was working before I left the store, so the clerk gave me instructions of how to configure it.

This conversation was way beyond what most people would feel up to, at the level I was at. Surely what I said above, i.e. basic questions with basic responses, is the best you could hope for?

Of course not! That's still ignoring the basic, adult intelligence that we all have.

He said a lot of words that I simply did not understand and then he got to “... Netzwerk, Mobiles Datennetzwerk”. Since I was familiar with my iPhone interface, these rang a bell of sounding very familiar to “...Network, Cellular Data Network”, and I knew that to get to these; I had to press



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“Settings, General” first. He would have said these words first, but not understanding them did *not* stop me from performing what he was requesting me to do.

The point of this example isn't that “Netzwerk” is similar to Network, but that I *extrapolated* the meaning of words that I *didn't* understand based on the *context*. Of course, it helps that I know the iPhone menu, but most things you tend to talk about are things that you are *familiar with* in some way. Even if you don't recognise specific vocabulary, the situation itself will point you in the right direction many times. In this case even understanding just 20 percent of the information can still lead to you extrapolating 100 percent of the meaning!

These are just brief examples – there are actually thousands more.

Observing body language, for example, has helped me integrate into countries quickly, and in many places in Europe (where skin colour doesn't happen to give me away) people presume that I'm a local because of the kinds of clothes I wear, posture I have, expression on my face, volume and tone of any words I might say, etc... that quite a lot of other expats just never try to focus on and ultimately always stand out quite obviously because of it.

Of course, once I start speaking more than a word or two this all changes, but there have been people I pass by in my building and just say *good morning* to (somehow pulling off those two words while not having a very noticeable accent) who have thought for weeks that I was from the same country as them.

This sense of *acting* like a local is a form of communication in itself and ultimately encourages that person to speak to me in their own language, even if I speak way less of it than they would speak English.

These skills are harder to describe as a whole and come from simply paying more attention to oblique sources of information rather than focusing entirely on understanding the words themselves.

Instead of me suggesting that you go learn these – you'll be happy to hear that you know them already! If you talk to someone on a high-noise, low-quality telephone line *in your native*



language and don't understand segments of a conversation, you can still be very sure of what they are saying.

This is especially the case of “filler” words that add no information such as *like, you know, Would you mind*, etc. In fact, a little later, we'll take advantage of these filler words (see *Conversation Connectors*). However, if you don't hear or understand these words, you miss no essential information.

Another situation shows this: have you ever seen a film, or talked to someone in your *native language* but in another dialect? There have been times when I have seen American movies or even an episode of the Simpsons and there have been words or expressions that I simply have not come across yet.

Did I press pause, and go research that term, and not continue watching until I knew exactly what it meant? Of course not – most of the time I figured it out from the context. When I first went to America there were new words and turns of phrase that I had never come across before, but they appeared sandwiched between *so many layers of context* that it was really obvious what they meant. I never formally studied any of these words, but context has taught me enough to have almost no problems at all speaking with those from another country.

In fact, even as I was growing up I learned most of my English vocabulary from *context*. There were occasional games as an infant for learning animal names, etc... but the vast majority of my native language came to me from just appreciating it in its context rather than being handed a list of words with their definitions or explanations.

In that case it's easy since I know the language already, but the same principle also applies to foreign languages.

Here's another example: In many different countries, when shopping in supermarkets and perhaps hoping just to hear the price of my groceries, I am very frequently asked a question I don't fully understand before paying.

Supermarkets around the world seem to have club-cards for bulk discounts, and I don't tend to apply for one. But many times, you are asked anyway if you have this card. This is very common

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in many countries. In the early stages, at best I will understand “... you have.... card...” and notice from the tone (similar in most European languages) that it's a question.

Since the situation usually doesn't require me to have any other card (senior discount based on my age, not talking about a credit card since I'm paying by cash, etc.) it's pretty safe to extrapolate that they are talking about the supermarket's club-card. The *situation* tells me what words are being said to me, even if I don't understand the words themselves.

So yes, it is quite possible to understand more than you think, and *say* more than you think, even if you just started learning the language a few days ago.

This makes it possible for me to make one of the most important suggestions of all for those who are serious about making fast progress: *immersion – as early as possible* and *no matter where you are*, and I talk about this in the next section.

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Summary: Communication relies on many things: body language, tone and volume of voice, extrapolation, saying words/expressions that you may not even entirely understand and **context**. These non-verbal modes of communication can help you speak the language with natives even if you have learned very little of it.



At home / in-country immersion

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Before I get started on immersion, I have to point out that I'm *not* necessarily talking about flying to a country. Devoted immersion is possible (albeit part-time) in your home country. Khatzumoto's story of learning Japanese to a professional level in just a year and a half before even going to Japan (see interviews) is one of many examples of this being successful.

I prefer to think of immersion the same way I prefer to think of fluency. The level involved in either depends precisely on your definition, and it's better to think of both of them based on their water-based metaphorical equivalents. Fluency is like a flowing river. Not necessarily (in fact, pretty much never) pure water, and occasionally meandering around the landscape rather than keeping in a straight precise line. In the same way, speaking *fluently* does not imply perfection.

Immersion is the same – when you immerse yourself in water you can be *totally immersed* and spend nearly all of your day under water (presumably in scuba-diving gear for breathing) *or* you can splash into the water, swim around deep inside for a while, and then come up for air. You were still *immersed*.

Unfortunately, what many people do (for languages) is dip their toe in the water, decide it's a little chilly and come back the next day to repeat the same. They feel that *very slowly* easing themselves in will get their bodies more used to the water.

It's *water*, it's not going to hurt you! Just jump in! Dipping your toe in the water is not going to help you swim, and studying a little bit of grammar every now and then is *not* going to help you to actually speak.

To continue the metaphor, going to the country is also simply not enough. I see expats living in countries for *years* and still speaking pathetically little of a language. This is like living in an air-conditioned submarine and thinking that you are getting the same experience as the scuba diver. *Technically* you are deep in the water, but you aren't getting the slightest bit wet.



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Immersion depends less on your geographical location and a *lot more* on your level of devotion. You have to put as much time as is humanly possible into your project. If you don't, you simply are not devoted enough.

I'm not saying *all* of your time – if you are not abroad, you have to work/study/etc. (presumably in your native language), and even if you are in the foreign country, you may have to work at a job involving your native language. These don't help, but unfortunately are part of the real world situation for most people.

However, apart from that absolutely necessary time in your mother tongue, you are *wasting your time* doing other things in your mother tongue that you could easily do in the foreign language. Doing as many of these things in your target language as possible is where true immersion comes in.

Do you watch TV? This is generally a waste of time in your native language. You don't learn *anything*, and many people (including me) believe that it is a very bad way to spend your free time when there are so many more productive and fun things you could be doing. There are way better ways to relax at the end of the hard day.

People who tell me they “don't have time” to learn a language and follow that up by asking me if I saw the latest episode of soap opera *x*, or reality show *y* need a good slap in the face to wake them up, in my opinion!

However, if you watch TV *in your target language* it suddenly becomes a useful activity. I personally wouldn't like to get into watching TV, but if you quite enjoy it then *do it in your target language*. You can find dubbed versions of some of your favourite TV shows online in most major languages. And if you can't, abandon it and get much more immersed by watching shows/movies made in the language of that country.

Do you like playing video games? Go into the game/device settings and change the presentation language if you can.

Do you use your computer a lot? Change the entire Operating System interface, as well as the language of your online accounts like Facebook to be in your target language (more details on



this in the Resources section). Change your phone's default language, tune into an online radio station in your target language (or standard radio if you are already in the country). Now you are starting to get immersed!

These are passive activities that you would perhaps do anyway in your mother tongue. All of this can be done independent of whether you are already in your target language's country or at home.

Next, of course, is **conversing in just that language**.

SUMMARY: You do not need to travel to be immersed – you can start doing passive activities in the language to force yourself to try to understand more of it. It will be hard, but jumping in the deep end is how you learn how to swim!

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Spoken immersion

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I am sure most people reading this have *already* learned a foreign language at school for several years, and yet they still don't speak it! There are a *lot* of reasons why this may be the end result, such as a weak curriculum, unenthusiastic teachers, too much focus on grammar, bored student, etc... but even with the best teacher and best course, the dedication involved in participating in most academic approaches is a far cry from what is actually needed.

Academic courses prepare you well for examinations based on what they want to test you on, but this is still nothing like how you would actually use the language in your first weeks in a country. Even knowing the most advanced grammar points, people still fail to have *basic* conversations.

The only way to learn to speak *quickly* is to start conversing *immediately*. Sorry, but there are no clever workarounds if you are serious about doing it quickly. To learn to speak *you have to speak*.

I learned this the hard way in Spain by spending six months trying out courses, weird learning techniques, studying grammar and vocabulary intensively, watching TV – I tried quite different things but was still almost completely unable to speak and my level of Spanish was miserable despite all of this work. The magic decision that changed everything for me was to try to live with almost **no English** at all for one month.

Let me be very clear about this and repeat it, because it is one of the most important decisions you will ever make on your path to fluency: STOP SPEAKING YOUR NATIVE LANGUAGE!

The reason so many people don't end up speaking their target language is because *they don't need to*. They really don't. Learning a bit of vocabulary every now and then and doing exercises in a book helps them learn a language they'd *like to speak*. Lots of people *would like to* speak a language, and they simply never do.



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When you force yourself into an immersion environment, this *sure-I'd-like-to-why-not* laziness changes immediately to **I NEED TO** speak that language! You really **need to** because you actually need to learn quicker to be able to speak it. This change in motivation changes your speed dramatically. The best way to do this is to jump in the deep end.

I have suggested this on my blog and quite a few readers have tried this *one month* experiment and have learned a huge amount from it. Apart from essentials like work and talking to your children etc. you can attempt *spoken immersion*. The key word of that last sentence is **essentials**. Spending three nights a week in the pub with your mates, for example, is *not* essential – you would reduce or eliminate such activities if you were actually serious about learning your language. The difference in those successful in learning languages quickly and those who don't are largely influenced by how the former are way more restrictive in defining “essentials” than the later.

In Spain, I allowed myself to speak English at work because I was an English teacher, and for weekly calls to my parents. *Every other second of my life* was through Spanish, even though my level of the language was extremely low.

If you are in the country already, the opportunities to do this are limitless. Get out of your shell (more on that below) and meet up with locals and go out with them instead.

If your partner is also learning the language then resolve that you will speak *for several hours a day* in that language. For most people, perhaps a dramatic 100 percent change is too abrupt, but with those interested in joining you in this mission you can certainly start with one or two hours a day and *have earned* the “break” to speak your own language afterwards.

With the right attitude, you won't look at speaking your native language as a *break* – you will be communicating in your target language, enjoying the chance to focus on the many different dimensions of communication and appreciating the experience of *living* through a foreign language. This attitude keeps people from needing to go back to their native language to “relax”. You will certainly be using your native language anyway at work, so when you *relax* and watch TV then relax in the target language.



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The level of commitment will have you simply *living* through the language (even if it's just for an hour a day of non-study actual conversation time over the Internet, for example, if you are not abroad yet; more on that in the links later) and not thinking of your language as a means of relaxing. It is taking time *away* from your mission. You have to look at it more aggressively.

Speaking the language as much as possible, or all the time ideally, is what will ultimately bring you to fluency quickest. I really cannot emphasise this enough. The decision to stop speaking English is what changed me from a typical frustrated learner with “*no talents*” in languages into the polyglot I am today. It is one of the most crucial and influential decisions I have made in the entire last decade of my life.

If you have a good flow of a language, and suddenly come to a word you don't know, what I always do with natives is try explain around the word using other words that I already know. Can't say glasses? Say “eye-windows” and mime glasses with your hands. Can't say giraffe? Say long-neck-animal-from-Africa. With a bit of imagination and essential vocabulary you can express yourself in many ways even if you don't know specific words.

You *can* live your life without needing your native language. This realisation for me started the snowball effect of making a mountain of progress compared to the six months of kind-of trying. Reading it here is fine, but the only way you'll truly appreciate this is to immerse yourself by *speaking now*. Don't even say you are *trying* to speak, you are simply *speaking* the target language. The quality of what you are saying does not influence this fact.

If you are going abroad soon, make the decision *now* to avoid English speakers (or speakers of your native language). Yes, “*avoid*”! You may consider this antisocial, but it's way more antisocial to maintain a bubble to *protect* you from speaking with the vast majority of people surrounding you.

Making local friends, or at least friends with other foreigners like yourself who are *also* learning the language and willing to practise with you too, is the best way to start.

To find more ways that you can immerse yourself, either at home or already abroad, complete the two page Worksheet number 3.



Getting into the flow of speaking immediately

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Despite what I've just said, there is one type of other non-native that you absolutely *do not* need to avoid, and who can actually be extremely helpful, sometimes more so than natives: other passionate non-native learners of the language.

You can learn a *lot* from other learners, so don't think that not having natives around you right now means you can't get some spoken immersion. This actually takes a little of the pressure off and allows you both to help each other using *only* other learners is not so useful as you won't get used to the actual language as it is truly spoken itself, but for practising with in the early stages, learners can help one another quite a lot!

You are going to be making mistakes based on your native language anyway, using sentence structures from your native language, the wrong preposition (because your native language does it), etc. This is something that you have to go through, and as I keep saying you can't start at perfection.

So, since you are making these mistakes influenced by your native language *anyway*, why not take it a wee bit further for the purposes of maintaining your flow in the language?

One "cheat" that I like to use when talking with other learners (or *very* occasionally, and ideally *never* with actual natives) is to speak a hybrid language of what I'm learning and my native one. Purists *hate* this idea, but I do whatever it takes to get into the flow of a language. This can be especially helpful between couples, family members and friends who want to practise the



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language with each other, but are worried about not being able to say the right word because they haven't learned it yet. You can speak the hybrid language with one another – not great for speaking your target language perfectly, or practically with natives, but it will give you that needed *flow* you need to get over this first speaking barrier that most people never do.

Rather than imagining your target language and your native language as two polar opposites, imagine a scale, with pure-native-level of each language on either side. When you start off, you might think that you are at the very end of the wrong side of this, but as I've discussed before you have a head start, so let's say you are at five percent *target-language*.

Even if all you have is a few words of the target language already, **use them**. Never say *thank you* in Spain to your English-speaking friends, always say *gracias*. Don't ask your friends if they'd like to go out for a *beer* in Prague, invite them out for a *pivo*. In Germany, don't say you'll see someone on Friday, but on *Freitag*. This use of *single words* is **very easy** and even the laziest learner should be familiar with them (especially if already in the country).

This means that even when you absolutely must be with English (or other) speakers, you can use your target language in these small chunks. This is the first step to getting into the flow and appreciating these words as being the way you have to express these concepts, rather than being simple translations of the “right way” of your native language.

This is the 5–10 percent part of the scale.

You can *very quickly* go on to the next level of actually trying to use foreign language words about half of the time. For example, in Czech I would ask English speakers “Kde je... the library?” (“Where is”). When in France, if you want to ask your partner if they want to go to the museum, but all you know how to say are *go* and *museum* in that sentence, then **use them**! Say “*Do you want aller to the musée?*”

This way you are using the vocabulary you know, and when you try to phrase questions like this a few times **you will see what you definitely have to work on**. (In this example, phrasing questions and the word *want*, specifically associated with the *you* conjugation.)



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Since context helps both you and the listener *a lot*, you can definitely use simpler words to get your point across when with natives. If I don't know the word for "translate" for example, but I say that I "make a document in English from French", I have entirely gotten my point across – you do not need to know all the words – imagination to use what you *do* know can get you very far.

When you say *nothing* then it seems like the entire language is one big gaping hole that needs to be filled. But when you actually start to use it, there is quite a lot you can do already, even with just the basics. You can see what you need to work on and adapt your studies to be more focused on these issues so that you can add little bits at a time.

This would be the 10–50 percent part of the scale.

Finally, you will have the core of the structure you need to speak and only be missing specific words. As I said above, with natives you can work around these words by trying to describe them in other ways, or using simpler synonyms. Can't say *furious* yet? Just say *very angry*. *Physicist*? Say *scientist*.

This is ultimately what you should be aiming for when at this stage and still acquiring more specific vocabulary that you will definitely want to start using at the next stage.

You can also cheat here and use English (or other) words on occasion, in an almost entirely *other language* sentence, but try to do this very rarely since you should now already be at the stage of being able to express yourself much better entirely in the target language, and you do *not* want to presume natives will understand that foreign word.

This means that you can jump from the previous 50 percent hybrid to 100 percent in the foreign language very quickly. It's not 100 percent perfect, but you can make the transition on this scale to 100 percent speaking in that language smoothly rather than abruptly if you like. You will still have some work to do in perfecting it, acquiring more specific vocabulary and improving your flow, but you *will* be speaking entirely in the language!

As I said, people do this anyway out of laziness, but I accept this as one way for me to get used to speaking the language and make sure that it is *only temporary*. Speaking like this in itself is *not* useful in real situations with natives, but it is a useful stepping stone. Rather than say I'm actually



speaking the language, I affectionately call this hybrid by its hybrid name. Between Spanish and English you have Spanglish, French and English: Franglais. Portuguese and Spanish: Português, etc. People can't criticise you for speaking Deutsch (German) badly, when you are actually speaking "perfect" *Denglisch*!

This approach is great for people who are living with others from their home country, who are also interested in learning that language. If they aren't interested, *convince them*. Time spent speaking **only** in your own language is time *wasted* as far as your mission is concerned.

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SUMMARY: Rather than abruptly starting to speak a language, you can ease yourself in by first throwing in a few words that you know, then using the foreign language structure with some of your native language, and eventually making this a majority of the target language. This may be "imperfect", but it will get you into the flow you need to be familiar with a language.



Necessary frustration

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Now, I'm not going to lie to you. Going through several hours a day of trying hard to speak a language you are barely familiar with can be *stressful* and very frustrating.

Yes, this means you will have to make sacrifices – seeing your fellow countrymen less, feeling frustrated with your low level many times and annoyed that you can't say things exactly the right way, and even feeling lonely sometimes due to the fact that you temporarily cannot express yourself *fully* or relate to people fully as an adult normally would. You will go beyond these stages, but unfortunately you have to *go through* this frustration to be able to make it to the other side. It's part of the journey.

But you can make these things less likely to happen by not going through the journey by yourself. Write about it on your language log, practise with other learners and share your frustration with them *in the language itself*. Seeing how others are struggling too, will remind you that it's *not you*, it's just a natural part of the process.

Nearly everyone will feel this frustration, but you can make it a lot easier on yourself by maintaining a positive attitude and enjoying yourself, and noticing your progress. You can pass through this stage quickly *as long as you keep at it*.

Being barely committed would mean that you may indeed stay permanently in this frustrating stage and gain little pleasure in communicating in the language. This is the stage that **most** learners end up in who learn language in schools etc.

However, full-time commitment would lead to you passing through the worst of this stage in a short manner of *weeks*. For half-time commitment, perhaps in just a couple of months you would pass through the worst of it and feel more comfortable speaking (even though you'll still have lots of mistakes and more work to do). Perfection won't happen, but a level of comfort and familiarity with the language can be reached very quickly. Reaching this stage by going through a short spell



of frustration is totally worth it for a lifetime of opportunities to live your life through that language.

Keep in mind that this frustration is not because you aren't smart enough, or because the language is too hard, it is just something that *many* people have to go through. By doing it *more intensively* (and of course applying the right attitude and techniques) you will pass through this stage very quickly.

If you are feeling frustrated with your progress right now, complete Exercise 4 in the worksheet.

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Hack for getting over unfamiliarity with a foreign language

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A huge aspect of this frustration stems more from the lack of familiarity of speaking a foreign language. It doesn't matter how “hard” it is – all languages will present this challenge to you – it seems *weird* at first not to call a *car* a car. There is this feeling that they are doing it *wrong* and you have to convert yourself to recreating the *noise* that they make. Even the term *foreign* language emphasises how strange it all is.

This conceptual change is a huge part of the challenge, i.e. just getting used to the *feeling* of a foreign language coming out of your mouth. When you combine this with the many other complications like unfamiliar vocabulary and complicated grammar, it's no wonder people get so intimidated by the whole process.

The thing is, once you have learned *one* foreign language, the second and third ones come *much quicker* because you have already accepted in your mind that you *can* speak a language that is not your native one. This mentality opens you up so much, and works as a catalyst to allow the language to flow so much smoother, even if the language you already learned is not the slightest bit similar to it.

I imagine most people reading this are worried about getting control of their *first* foreign language. So why am I bringing this up? Well, what if you could very easily make that language that you are so passionate about your *second* foreign language? What if you could *quickly* get over that awkward feeling of not being used to communicating in a foreign language before you even really started on your specific target language?



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Well there is actually a way! It is an unconventional suggestion, but hear me out: devote *two weeks* entirely to ESPERANTO. Esperanto is an artificial language, designed with hopes to become the international second language, as English currently is. It has interesting uses for meeting people, but promoting its political and social potential is not something I intend to do here. I'm looking at it from a purely practical perspective to someone focused on learning a specific other language.

Esperanto is a **very easy language to learn** and does away with nearly every complication you can imagine that many languages have. No noun genders, no conjugations, no inconsistent phonetic rules, easy vocabulary to learn, and it doesn't have difficult pronunciations. This means that when you learn it, *all you basically have to do* is get used to speaking *a different* language.

Studies have shown that studying Esperanto *first* (six months in certain studies, not necessary in our case as they would have used the academic approach that some of us aren't a fan of!) and *then* studying the priority language for a year and a half, actually gave students a *significantly better command* than those who just studied just that language for the same two-year period, *even though they actually studied the target language itself less*.

This is because they practically “skipped” the hard part of learning a second language, and their target language immediately became the third one! They were *used to* the feeling of a language already so even though the next one was definitely harder, there was that extra “used to a foreign language” component that they already got over.

So my suggestion is to use the techniques discussed in this guide to learn to speak Esperanto for *two weeks*. You likely won't be speaking fluently after those two weeks, but you'll be able to have chats with other speakers (in chatrooms and Skype conversations online; there are a lot of people ready to help) if you apply a good learning and intensive practising approach.

It will be frustrating and weird to speak a foreign language, but you will *not* have to think so much (you will recognise a lot of words, and grammar is hugely simplified). Despite this, you will be able to express *anything* you can imagine in your native language.

Some of the linked resources I mention later for learning online and finding natives to speak with can help for Esperanto, but one site that is particularly useful with an interesting course to follow



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is <http://lernu.net> (the course is given in many different languages, and a dictionary is included at the side of the site). Of course, *it's completely free*. In your second week, you can start making Skype calls in Esperanto, and many people in Lernu's chat feature and in forums will be happy to help.

Even if you have no interest in learning a language like Esperanto (I personally find the people at regularly organised meetings to be well worth learning the language, but I know that many people don't like the idea of devoting too much time to a language with less history like Esperanto does), if you devote just two weeks to it and are serious about it, you **WILL** be able to have those two weeks will push you **months** ahead in your target language in terms of confidence and familiarity to speak *a language* if you were successful in having chats with people in Esperanto.

After those two weeks you can *speak* (and write/read/listen to) another language. That's something to be proud of! Then focus on your target language, safe in the knowledge and familiarity that you *can* speak a foreign language – this removes a huge aspect of the difficulty in speaking *any* language.

SUMMARY:

One of the hardest aspects of learning any language is pure unfamiliarity with trying to communicate in a language that is not your own. This is a huge part of the work, so why not get it out of the way by learning to speak a really easy language first? Then your target language can become your *second* foreign language.



It's important to make mistakes

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Following the advice I give in this guide you will undoubtedly make a *lot* of mistakes when you first start speaking a language. I'm certainly not offering a way to avoid these by trying to “absorb” a language in advance before trying to use it, as many courses suggest. (I'm sure there are examples of this working, but *results come about too slowly*). By suggesting that you speak in the early stages, I'm actually opening you up to the possibility of making a huge amount of mistakes.

This is a *necessary* part of the process if you wish to make fast progress. You simply cannot avoid making mistakes!

So, to make sure you maintain a positive attitude and keep up your momentum, you *have* to change your attitude towards mistakes. Rather than mistakes being the walls holding you back from speaking, they are simply bends in the road you must follow if you want to continue on your path.

The **only way** to make *no mistakes* is to not speak at all. Quite a lot of people try this approach! I'm sure they can feel proud of having never made a single mistake in the foreign language... pity about the minor detail of *never trying* and having no ability to converse other than perhaps as an outside observer at best.

So, I suggest you try to actually to *embrace* making mistakes! The more mistakes you make, the more you are actually *speaking*, and more importantly, *communicating* – and the closer you are to your objective of speaking well.

Every language learner before you *has made mistakes*. No matter who they are. If I cared to count them, I would have made tens (or even hundreds) of thousands of mistakes in speaking languages over the last seven years. If I only make a single mistake in a foreign language in one day, then I have *not spoken enough*.



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I take the counter-intuitive approach of actually trying to make as many mistakes as possible! Of course, never intentionally, and *always attempting to be aware of these*. The mistake can be a very useful tool for showing you what you need to work on, but if you spit it out with no consideration of how you could say it better next time, then you may end up speaking this hybrid language permanently.

Mistakes in vocabulary can be reduced by learning more words through exposure and study (examples of how mentioned in a later section), but mistakes in grammar may be fossilised if you are too lazy to drill them out of you once you have reached a more comfortable level of fluency.

Getting corrections at this stage can be very helpful – I explain below how I convince natives to listen to and help me. However, getting too many corrections in the early stages is not so helpful beyond serious mistakes. In the first stages you need to get into the flow of speaking, even if you are speaking incorrectly.

The thing to remember about grammar mistakes is that a *lot* of grammar rule differences are only really helpful for *tidying up* the language and speaking it *correctly*. If you use the wrong definite article gender, adjective ending, or sentence order, it may sound strange; but as long as you speak clearly and confidently, the other person *will* understand you. *Communication* should always be the most important goal.

SUMMARY:

Mistakes are a necessary part of learning a language. Don't worry about making them – if you make *no* mistakes then you are making no progress!



Study triage

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There are certain grammar points and key words of vocabulary that really need to be learned as they help convey essential information and avoid ambiguity, but this depends on the particular language and if you try to speak a lot you will quickly discover specifically what is causing problems for *basic communication* and you will know to study these points immediately.

I like to compare this priority level of study to the *triage* system applied in a hospital. Hundreds of people go into a hospital to be cured of various ailments, but the ones seen to *first* are the people who are in immediate danger of dying. Those in slight pain are put at the bottom of the list. The reason for this prioritisation is obvious.

The same needs to be applied to language learning priority. Some good courses work with this approach and teach you essential basic phrases first and only sprinkle grammar in there occasionally. If you find such a course, then it can be very useful (rather than use particular books, I usually just see what is available in my local library, or nearest bookshop – I've found advantages in different courses and wouldn't recommend one in particular myself).

Although much harder, you can do this to a certain degree by yourself (it gets easier with time, and especially if you take on a few languages; this is why I learn almost entirely independently now). Ideally, you would follow *some kind* of structured course (online, book-based or even *some* classroom type courses), but feel flexible to skip ahead to something that would help you *right now*. There is no need to read most courses from start to end.

The examples given above show what I mean. When you start speaking *immediately*, you will notice immediately what you *must* learn to be able to actually express yourself and understand basically. In most pre-made grammar books, courses, and vocabulary lists, this means you *can* skip ahead. Understanding everything *is not necessary*.



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When learning vocabulary, for example, if I come across the equivalent word for *shoelace* I will almost certainly ignore it before reaching intermediate level. Learning such a word that I am unlikely to say is not going to be immediately beneficial for me. Studying it for the time when I *maybe might just* need it, must go *way down* in the study triage.

Becoming a good filter for such study points and knowing when to skip something and come back to it later is essential in being able to learn what will actually help you speak *now*.

Although I've already defined what *fluency* (generally) means to me, there are other levels of having *fluency* or *flow* even in your basic conversations, and when coming across something you may not need to use so frequently you have to learn to simply *ignore it*. It will only slow you down right now.

This is, once again, an issue with not aiming for *perfection*. Accepting that you can't know everything in the early stages will ultimately catapult you into faster strides of progress.

As long as you focus on the essentials, you will have enough to convey what you need to say in initial stages. Learn common courtesies like *please* and *thank you*, question words, greetings, basic things you need to ask for (bathroom, hotel, food), basic action verbs (walk, come, go, bring, can, eat, etc.) and anything else you tend to say frequently. Don't know what you need? The best way to find out is to *try to have a conversation!* Over the Internet or with a native – no matter how weak you are, try it out and you'll immediately see the words you need to learn *now*.

This idea can also be applied to *correction*. Getting feedback from natives or advanced learners / teachers is vital to make sure you are going in the direction of speaking really well. However, in the very early stages I don't request so much non-critical correction, since the target in the early stage is more focused on achieving a *flow* in the language and not a conversation with zero mistakes.

Once you reach intermediate stage, you need to convince as many people as possible to help you so you avoid maintaining a plateau of *acceptable* in the language. The strategy needs to be dynamic with your learning level. The way you learn in your first week and the way you do it should be completely different to how you do it several months in.

SUMMARY:

Skip through any grammar or vocabulary that is not *essential* for communication at your current level and learn what you *need* to speak without hesitating too much.



Getting over the plateau

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With the right approach, learning strategy, and attitude, you will make progress very quickly in the language. In the early stages, as long as you are motivated you *will* keep up really good progress! However, keeping this momentum up over the long term is going to be hard! Sometimes we can lose sight of the end goal and our level of enthusiasm can drop – if this happens, you will have reached a plateau.

The question is – do you stay here, or do you charge on to try to bring your progress back on track?

Depending on your learning style and personality, your current approach may need some tweaking if something is holding you back from reaching the next level. Too many people reach an *OK* level, where they can *get by* and basically stop here and never improve on their level. Even those who speak fluently, but who would like to reduce their accent or improve their proficiency level, will never do so if the way they are going about trying doesn't work for them.

In this case you need to *debug the system*.

Thomas A. Edison was interviewed by a newspaper after 800 unsuccessful tries to make a working light bulb. "How does it feel to have failed 800 times?" the reporter asked. And Edison's answer?

"I haven't failed 800 times. I haven't failed once. What I have done, is I have succeeded in proving that those 800 ways won't work. Once I eliminate all the ways that won't work, I will find the one way that will."

Several years later, after thousands more "successful proofs" he managed to find a way that works, and thus illuminated the world.



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This is the approach that you have to take with your language-learning project. This guide points you in the right direction, but ultimately you will discover other tools and concepts that will help you personally even better. If what you are using now *is not working*, then maybe it's time to try a new approach? You aren't giving up on the project, but you might have to admit that this method simply is not doing the trick for you.

Thanks to my engineering and IT background, I tend to look at certain problems as being similar to a computer program (read: solving problems can be similar, not the human beings with the problems!). When there was a bug in the code preventing the entire application from running properly I would find it, eliminate it, and try something different for that aspect of it. This approach has been very effective in language learning, too.

Any serious project can be looked at as a series of steps that take you to your final goal (be that short term or long term), and if you reach a brick wall then try something slightly different and you will get around it. Many of life's problems can be looked at in this analytical way, and language learning is certainly one of them.

So if you have tried a particular approach to the level of satisfying you that it definitely doesn't work for you, sometimes the approach, rather than you yourself, really is the problem and it's time to try something new to see if that works better.

This entire guide is based on my own years of trying several different approaches and eliminating those that simply did *not* get me to my target in the preferred time period.

In the next section, I'll share some of the most important discoveries that I've made for being able to actually speak with natives. You should seriously consider trying as many of these as possible, and then if you see one doesn't work – try something else! My own advice is not the perfect learning approach for everyone on the planet, however the approach of *finding the best approach* is a strategy in itself, and that can be useful for *everyone*.

SUMMARY:

To get over your *plateau* of not making any progress, you need to step back and see if there are any aspects of your approach that can be improved. You can find the ideal way for you!

Part Four

Speaking with natives





Just ask

Part Four Speaking with natives

One of the main criticisms I have heard of my suggestions to start speaking immediately, apart from the speaker's inability to say anything, is the suggestion of people's impatience to listen to you.

This is a huge oversimplification of how people will treat you. In almost every culture, the people I have met and shown genuine interest in learning their language have been extremely helpful and patient with me. Even in northern Europe, where people's level of English is considerably higher and I was warned that they would “force” me to speak English, I have found that if you are convincing enough they *will* help you.

To see how to *find* natives to speak with, even if you can't travel right now, check out the tips in the *Resources* section. But once you find them, even if you are still stumbling through the basics you can still convince them to help!

Knowing how to do this is important both in your home country and abroad – when abroad it can be surprisingly hard to practise the language if the learner has the wrong approach. As I keep saying, I have met *hundreds* of expats living abroad for *years* who don't speak the local language. This is due in part to inefficient learning methods, but also due in large part to their own confidence in not feeling “worthy” enough to talk with a native yet.

And in certain locations, the locals may not be *as* helpful as in others. If your native language is English, a lot of people will be very friendly with you simply because of this. Getting “free” English practice when it would otherwise cost so much means that, unfortunately, a lot of English-speaking expats end up getting used by locals and will have plenty of friends, but learn almost *nothing* of the language. The best way to avoid this is to prevent it from happening *from the beginning*.

So, how do you convince them to actually speak with you?



Just ask.

Yep, it's that easy.

Sometimes people might speak to you in your native language simply because they might think they are doing you a favour, or presuming that you can't speak any of their language, or because they are in your home country and your language is the default language. If you just say "*Could we speak your language? I'd really like to practise!*" (and say it *in the actual language*, of course!) most of the time they will be very happy to oblige! This works for me practically all of the time.

Even though the answer will usually be yes, if you make the situation too uncomfortable they may want to change to another language (if they speak it). Making it uncomfortable actually depends a lot less on your level of grammar/vocabulary and a lot more on your personality and behaviour. If you apply the right approach, they will *want* to listen to you, even if you speak poorly.

Even if your level is OK, it's not that interesting to hear someone talk about themselves in a stumbling fashion (*my name is, I am from, I work as a*, etc.). This won't keep the interest of the person listening to you, not necessarily because of how you are saying it but because it's *boring* for many people to listen to someone give an emotionless biography.

In fact, this is another worry people have for simply not wanting to try to speak the foreign language – they think that they'd have "nothing interesting to say". I can assure you that I do *not* spend my first weeks of trying to speak a language talking about the weather...

So, rather than spend *too much time* learning basic phrases of how to say who you are and what you do, after getting through this quickly I start with the *story of why* I am learning the language, and I do it passionately. As well as this I use conversational connectors (as described below) to make sure that the other person can keep up *their end* of a conversation with me, even if I feel I can't say so much myself yet. Everyone loves a good listener!

SUMMARY:

To convince someone to speak their language with you, just ask!

Part Four Speaking with natives



The human aspect

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The differences are crucial here. Most people who think that it's impossible to communicate in a language in the early stages are simply not looking at it from the social perspective. They see the other person listening to you as a *test* (perhaps similar to the faceless examinations they would have received in school), where every mistake you make brings you closer to the minimum limit that you can pass with.

Human beings are *not* like this. It's not as much the amount of *mistakes* you make, as it is *how you make them feel*. Don't ignore this human aspect when you are speaking a foreign language!

So, by giving a passionate story of *why* you would really like to keep the conversation in their language, you will appeal to this human nature. I tell them about my crazy three-month missions (for dramatic interest), and I've heard people go straight into mentioning how they are finally discovering their roots since their grandparents spoke the language, or that it has *always* been their dream to be able to converse in that language, or that they don't want to be another typical foreigner speaker and not learn the language of the country they are living in. These will appeal to the emotional interest of the listener and get them on your side.

Learning how to briefly share this story to appeal to their human nature is *more important* than learning how to say how many brothers/sisters you have, or recite your daily routine or many other things we tend to learn in most courses. Can I say it again? Don't ignore this human aspect when you are speaking a foreign language!

To continue from that, let's look at hesitations.

Em... Um... Uh.... – those awkward moments where you are searching for a word that you *know* you learned and need to produce it, but you require about five seconds to do so. This will happen to all of us. A patient listener will endure them, but I have found a way that works excellently for me to get around this problem, just in case they wouldn't.



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The method I use is.....

.....

..... dramatic pauses! Definitely not for everyone (it depends on your personality), but these have helped me so much in keeping people's attention despite needing a moment to recall how to say something.

Rather than say “um...”, I may put my hand on the other person's shoulder, look them in the eye (or stare pensively into the distance), take a deliberate deep breath... and then say the word. Since I have made such dramatic pauses a natural part of my basic conversations in a foreign language, during this time I am actually thinking hard about that word I have temporarily forgotten.

Even simple conversations suddenly become all the more intriguing with this addition.

For example, if I need a moment to recall the way to say a key word, I could say “I'm going to the...” [raise index finger analytically, take a step back, breath in deeply as if you are about to reveal the secret of *life the universe and everything*, and look out the window at the quest that awaits you] “... supermarket! Do you need anything?”

If you do this enough times people will start to wonder if you are as loopy as Captain Jack Sparrow, but they will indeed be quite interested in hearing you continue and even *enjoy* these dramatic pauses if you do them right, don't overdo them, or at least mix them up to be different in terms of body language involved.

I'm not quite suggesting that everyone do this, but I hope you see what I mean. Injecting some personality into your conversations means that even *basic* chats can be quite interesting to the other person. It's not just *what* you say (your store of vocabulary), but *the way you say it* (your personality). This human aspect of basic conversations is ignored in most courses, which tend to focus too much on the actual information, and are essential aspects of our daily interactions in *any* language.

If you have your own ideas of how you could inject your personality into basic conversations, give them a try! Keep in mind that whatever you say is more interesting to the other person for reasons beyond conveying *facts*.



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Applying logical social rules to your basic conversations help a huge amount. If you hear the person shares a common interest, talk about *that* inasmuch as you are able to, rather than irrelevant phrases you have learned that you might be able to say better to impress the other person with how much you have learned. If they are wondering about something you can advise them on, tell them everything you know about it!

If I suggest that I have a theory that any language can be learned to fluency in three months, then the other person suddenly becomes all ears, no matter how bad my level of the language I'm explaining it in is. Hearing something interesting transcends language levels for motivating the other person to want to listen to you and encourage your progress.

You can also give the other person simple motivations to want to help you and give you feedback – if you are speaking the language with your partner, promise a kiss for every correction. If you are going out with some natives, say that whoever corrects you 20 times first gets a free beer on you.

When they *do* correct you, **genuinely thank them** for their help and smile and show appreciation that they are bringing you closer to your goal of speaking well. If their suggestion creates an awkward silence then they will be much less inclined to help you again in future.

A smile and general attempt to make other people feel more comfortable through positive body language will bring you much further than speaking perfectly ever could. When the native speaker hears you struggle, sees you fidget, hesitate awkwardly, and generally look like you are not enjoying yourself in this aspect of basic communication, then their *human nature* will be to try to help spare you from this torture! They will probably speak English (or otherwise) to you (if they can) *because they are nice*.

Speak confidently and try to have a confident posture. Many countries may be more expressive with their bodies than yours and it's important to take this into account. Any awkwardness you may create is less due to mistakes in your grammar, and more likely due to how uncomfortable you are projecting yourself to others and making them feel the same way. On the other hand, a *positive* attitude is also contagious!



You should aim to always have an upbeat attitude and a warm smile – and to laugh at your own mistakes if necessary to make the other person more at ease. These “social catalysts” are what make basic conversations so much more enjoyable and even *possible* despite having such a low level of the language.

So, I'll say it a third time to *really* drill it into you! Don't ignore this human aspect when you are speaking a foreign language! :)

SUMMARY:

Conveying your personality will convince the other person to want to speak to you much more than impressing them with perfect grammar and many words of vocabulary ever will. Even your hesitations to speak can be made more interesting if you inject some personality into them!

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Too shy to speak

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No matter what language you are learning, and even with all the best intentions and strategies, one major obstacle may be holding you back from even trying to use it in the first place – not being confident enough, or feeling too shy.

One reason I feel that a lot of online and CD-based courses for language learning are so popular is because they are immune to this issue. Even if you are shy, if you are locked in your room or listening to your iPod, you are definitely not leaving your comfort zone, so most people would prefer to learn that way.

Many learners can make successful progress this way, although it is slower than it could be. However, *even if you wait* and spend *years* learning, when the time comes to actually use your language, you will have to learn to get over this insecurity no matter how much you have learned.

Meeting new people and communicating with them is ultimately the *whole point* of learning another language (unless your focus is on literature/movies etc.), and if you aren't ready for this, even having the *potential* to speak the language “perfectly” means nothing if you are too timid to even open your mouth.

This is another bend in the language-learning road that needs to be circumnavigated to get to the other side if you intend to have confident command over a foreign language. One criticism I have for courses focused *entirely* on self-study and no practice (as useful as they are) is that they almost seem to *embrace* people's shyness.

It's time to be frank – if you feel you are shy, you are doing nothing more than satisfying a self-fulfilling prophecy. I'm not going to sugar-coat this one: **get over it!**

I find it hard to believe that people are *born* introverts or extroverts. There is perhaps some evidence to suggest that genetics contributes to this, but it is definitely **not** a life sentence. Some



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people might have to work harder than others to obtain the ability to mingle easier, but it is a **skill** that can be learned like any other. You can learn to cook, you can learn a language, and you can learn to be less shy.

This was certainly true in my own case – as a young nerdy engineering student graduate, when I started travelling it was quite difficult to make new friends because of this “fact” I would tell myself of me being too shy to approach people. As I said above, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. I wouldn't approach anyone or be confident in using my languages because I told myself that I couldn't. There was nothing in the world actually stopping me from trying. The barrier standing in my way was one that I created for myself.

A blind man can't just *will* his way into being able to see, but shyness exists mostly because you tell yourself it does. You *can* get over it!

Reading inspirational books and blogs can always help with this, and I encourage you to do your own research to learn how to feel more confident with yourself. Going into detail into the psychology behind shyness is outside of the scope of this guide, but what you need to do is actually not that complicated.

There is no need to prepare yourself, feel ready, find the right moment, think of exactly what you are going to say, etc. *Thinking too much* is what keeps many shy people to themselves. In the same way as not being able to speak a language *perfectly* in the exact sense of the word, you can't be a “perfect” extrovert with exactly the right situation awaiting you. You just need to dive in, walk up to the natives, and start speaking.

This is a skill I have been forced to pick up over recent years, because as a single traveller if I want to make friends I need to go up to them and introduce myself. This has spilled over into my language learning technique and when I see a native, I simply go up to them and say *hola/ciao/salut*, etc.

Doing this with someone walking past you in the street would indeed be very strange, but talking to “strangers” in most other situations is *not actually that imposing*. At parties, people expect you to be social, when making a purchase, or in a restaurant when ordering food, you are talking to the person anyway, so just throw in an extra pleasantry in their language. If it isn't peak hour,



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they'll usually be happy to have a quick chit chat (depending on the culture). In many social events, most people have *no reason whatsoever* to not want to talk with you, especially if your body language and general behaviour is friendly.

When in social events, as well as applying the techniques outlined above, I make sure what I'm talking about is slightly more interesting by skipping through basic introductions quickly and starting a conversation in the middle. Once again, this takes some getting used to with strangers, but it has been very effective when I want to keep the attention of someone I have just met.

If I walked up to someone in a social event and said "Hello, my name is Benny. I'm a translator from Ireland. I like to travel and learn languages. What's your name and what do you do?", *sure*, this sounds like a typical pleasant conversation, and it's certainly easier to prepare for this script in advance – these kinds of conversations are certainly fine for the very first attempt(s).

However, to really get someone interested, I like to start a conversation from the middle. Depending on the situation, you can do this in many ways. When at a party, I walk up to a stranger, clink their drink, say *cheers* (even though I usually just have juice or a cola) and ask them if they like the music. If you or your neighbour are new to a building/street, say hello as you pass them and tell them they are more than welcome to pop by for tea/a drink/lunch whenever they want. This works wonders, and after some pleasant small talk, the other person is generally way more interested to hear you properly introduce yourself.

The number of examples are limitless, and it really does just require you to approach the person and talk. It *is* difficult at first, since you are indeed outside of your comfort zone, but like a lot of things in life you get good at it with practise! Before you travel abroad, get used to "social skydiving" of talking to as many strangers as possible in your home town.

Start *immediately* and practise regularly with everyone (in foreign languages or your own language), as learning how to do this will make a huge difference in your confidence to speak the target language ultimately.

Now, complete Worksheet number 5!



Conversational connectors

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All of this is well and good, but even when you are confident you are still limited by what you have learned to say. You might imagine that in the early stages you could perhaps ask for specific information once you've learned those essential phrases, but after you get the answer you might not have anywhere to go to get into a pleasant conversation.

Conversations are not generally a series of questions from one side and answers entirely on the other. That's more of an interrogation... but even if you are still getting used to the feeling of speaking a language and still need to learn the core vocabulary to be able to contribute some more, there is a way to keep the conversation flowing!

The problem with abrupt endings is that they don't invite the other person to continue very much. "How is your food? Good." "How old are you? 27." The other person may be left with an awkward moment where they have to think of something else to say and even then, expect nothing more than a single response once again – even if you are charming in your response, as suggested above, this still doesn't leave the other person with many options.

Even if you are still learning the basics, there is actually a way around this! *Conversational connectors* are words or phrases that you add into your conversation that *don't necessarily convey any actual information* and can be used flexibly in a large number of situations because of this.

We use these all the time in our native language. In English, terms like *to tell the truth*, *you know*, and even pleasantries like *thanks*, *excuse me*, and *please* are just softeners added to make an otherwise information-based exchange sound more polite. But these don't contribute to the information itself, and that's what makes them a very broadly useful "hack" for those of us in the early language learning stage.

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When you listen to the target language, you will hear these terms a lot and many of them will not be present in your native language. It's important to use these as frequently as possible! This will make your conversation sound way more natural than the right application of difficult grammar points can.

And the best part is, you can take advantage of them to “cheat” your way into having a more fluid conversation, even when you are not ready to contribute so much to it yourself yet.

This concept was explained to me by [Anthony](#), who illustrated as follows:

You are in a restaurant and somebody asks what you think of the meal. From a typical language-learning experience, a student would often get flustered, find the experience unnerving, say “urm ... good!” and hope they aren’t asked any more uncomfortable questions.

However, if they could use conversational connectors, they could say things like:

Thanks for asking. To tell the truth, I must say that the food is good. Let me ask you the same question: What do you think of your food?

The same conversational connectors can be recombined in all sorts of ways. Later on, then, the question “Where are you from?” could be replied to with: “To tell the truth, I am from England. Thanks for asking. Let me ask you: where are you from?”

Very little of each conversation is actually about the topic under discussion, but more about establishing intimacy and keeping the conversation going.

So, rather than abruptly ending the conversation when you give your answer, you are softly bouncing it back at them and inviting them to continue their end of a conversation.

Included in the guide is an Excel sheet (can also be opened with the *Open Office* tool, or *Google Documents* – both free) with a list of example conversational connectors such as agreeing/disagreeing (*one hundred percent! That is an exaggeration*), opening (*that is a good question*), general fillers (*between you and me, actually*), qualifying (*as you already know*) and switching (*by the way, I have an interesting story about it*). Try to find the translation in your target language of these (some are included in the translations of this guide) and learn them to give you some extra words to keep a basic conversation flowing!



These are also excellent ways of replacing those moments of “um...” hesitation. If you learn these phrases well enough they will come without you needing to think too much, and you can use that extra couple of seconds to give yourself more time to consider what you are saying next.

Task: Open the “Conversational connectors” document included in the guide and try to fill in as much as you can with phrases in your target language (from translations included in this guide or from dictionaries/advice from natives). Then learn them and start using them as regularly as possible!

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Taking on several languages

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If your first language-learning project is going well, you may have the long term goal of taking on more than one. This depends entirely on the individual – most people are quite content with their specific target language and don't particularly need any more.

As I said before, there is a big difference between *would like to* and *need*, and most people simply don't need to take it any further. If your motivation isn't there beyond bragging rights or something superficial, you will achieve very little in your next language.

If becoming a polyglot is truly your long term goal then it's important not to get ahead of yourself and take on several languages at once, especially similar ones, and *especially* when you have not mastered a single one yet.

The advice in the previous section regarding gaining the confidence to speak a language first still apply. Briefly take on Esperanto as suggested, and otherwise stick with your target language until you are speaking comfortably. If you are not used to conversing in one language, the next one will present many challenges beyond what it should.

In addition, if you are learning two languages simultaneously, it's easy to confuse whether the vocabulary you learned goes with one or the other. If you have reached fluency in one language, then you can take on the next one! Starting the next one earlier than this may lead to you spreading yourself thin for *both* languages.

So if you take on more than one, make sure not to forget that first language! Practise it as often as possible, even when not in the country it is spoken in, using the suggestions given in the next section.

If you really aren't sure which language to choose next (always a bad idea! There should be an emotional or personal reason to take on that language), then consider those in the same



language family! These will present less of a learning curve since you may have a considerable amount of vocabulary and grammar rules already learned from the first time round.

Of course, if you do this then you have further reasons to possibly mix the languages up! This is why I apply the principles given above to give my multiple language learning tasks another dimension – the human one!

Rather than seeing a language as based purely on its content, I associate it with the culture that speaks it and emulate them right down to their body language, posture, and expressions. For example, when speaking French you may want to say the words further outside your mouth and shape your lips to accommodate this. However, when speaking Italian you may be more animated with your upper body while actually speaking it.

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These two languages are very similar, but I have managed to separate them in my mind by applying this principle. I simply cannot see myself saying a French word (e.g. *voiture*) when speaking Italian! It just doesn't work – *voiture* is associated with the language in every aspect. I say the word while *acting* as French as I can. When in Italian-mode it's hard to produce this word for me because of the association and *feel* of it. With practice this becomes even more obvious – you don't just learn vocabulary as is, but you learn them in their context and in their more human association with the very culture itself.

This is yet another reason why I encourage people to develop their language skills while actually speaking the language. Learning vocabulary in isolation in your room/classroom and never applying it means it has no human association – so you may indeed remember its translation, but using it at the right time (even within the same language) is going to be very much harder! If speaking multiple languages is your end-goal, then you will have to be open to going through the frustrating stage mentioned before, *again*. This will always be there. You will get through it *quicker* in future times, but it will never go away and this in itself is a new level of frustration. You would have already gone through the huge amount of work of being able to communicate in a foreign language, only to be right back at square one of not being able to fully express yourself once again!



In general, you will have *debugged* your learning approach in the first language, and once you have a way that works well for you, you can take on future languages if you wish to!

Summary: If you would like to learn more than one language, wait until you are confident in your *first* foreign language before taking on the next one. To avoid mixing them up, associate the word with its cultural context and how a native might say it. And don't forget that the frustrating stage will always be there no matter what language you take on!

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Improving memory

Part Five Learning resources

In this section I'll discuss some learning resources that will help you to improve your level of the language so you can converse even better!

I've already talked about one of the most important resources at length in the previous section – other people. But before I get into online or computer-based tools, there is one other tool that can be used anywhere, with no technology, books, or even other people: your mind!

One issue that almost everyone I've met learning a language has is *remembering* the words. It seems like a daunting task to learn tens or hundreds of thousands of words required to speak a language confidently – especially for people who generally have trouble recalling people's names or where they left the keys... it's another reason to prefer to leave language learning to the *geniuses* who have superhuman memory capacity, right?

No way! As I've said before, calling language learners geniuses is lazy; every aspect of the process can be broken down and memory capacity is certainly one of them that us mere mortals can dramatically improve. The reason you might think that you can't do it is simply because what you've been trying up to now is *extremely inefficient* and time-consuming.

When you encounter a new word that you need to remember, the most common method to learn this word is repetition based rote learning. So, for example, you might come across the French word *gare* and need to remember that this means 'train station'. What we typically might do is simply repeat this over and over... *and over* again in our minds aloud until it finally sinks in. *Gare* – train station, *gare* – train station, *gare* – train station, *gare* – train station, *gare* – train station, *gare* – train station – dozens or hundreds of times.

This is a **bad idea**. You are making no connection whatsoever between the words, only hoping that this repetition will burn it into your mind. Unfortunately, the best way for this to work is to



do it a *lot of times* and this requires a lot of time and is mind-numbingly boring. Yet another reason to dislike learning languages using traditional approaches...

Even after doing it a huge number of times, you are more likely to be able to *recognise* the word, but not be able to *produce* it. This is one reason why many people who have studied a language academically, say that they can understand it pretty well, especially when reading it. However they simply cannot remember how to say these words in the language. The learning process is almost one-way (target language to native language), and this is not useful for conversations.

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Image association

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So you need an association! One excellent way is to make sure you see that word in its correct context, i.e. as it's actually used. This requires a lot of reading/listening, *lots* of exposure is still required, and recall still tends to be one way (once again, target language to native language) since you are reading or listening in the target language and translating it to native language in your mind. With the right amount of exposure you will soon stop translating altogether and no longer need to go via your native language, but it's still less useful for producing the language *yourself*.

So there are two fun techniques I like to apply when I come across new words or phrases. Both of them help in *producing* the words – which is way more important than simply recognising the words. It's unfortunate, but people who learn vocabulary unidirectionally will tend to be quite disappointed when they need to speak and can't remember how to say what they would indeed *recognise*.

These techniques are more enjoyable, and after you get used to them they only take a couple of seconds (or even less) per term to learn. Luckily, *any recall technique*, even boring repetition learning, can help the word be burned into memory if you *actually use it* a couple of times, in the right context, in a natural conversation. The first few times you will pause a moment (don't forget to make the pause more interesting than “um...”!) to remember the association, but then the word comes *naturally* to you and you can abandon the association entirely. You simply *know* the word. So these strategies are actually temporary means to bring you to this instant recall quicker.

The first one, which I have mentioned on the blog, is ***image association***. You have to take the word you need to remember and make an imaginative association with its translation in your mind. This should *always* be as imaginative, colourful, funny and ridiculous as possible. Simply



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imagining the two objects basically interacting is *not enough* because that's easy to forget. The stranger the story, the *better*.

I'll give you one of my favourite examples, applied to the French *gare* mentioned above. Here's the story I made up:

There is no word in English (at least that I know of) that sounds almost the same as “gar” (with an “ah”, not “ay” sound) so thinking for a moment, the closest I could come up with was Garfield, a popular comic strip (and cartoon and even movie) of a fat, lazy, and sarcastic orange cat (that talks, of course). I also thought of a very specific train station that I used a lot in Valencia, in Spain. It is important from the very beginning to make everything colourful and full of details and movement. I imagined the people rushing through the station, under where the timetable can be found, the platform I usually went to, and the machine I would buy the tickets from. Suddenly, there is a big fat orange cat, in very cartoony colours; not your typical tabby cat, but Garfield himself with his trademark sneaky grin.

But he isn't just sitting in the train station (that would be very easy to forget). He is about to miss an important train directly to Bologna for a Lasagna-eating competition! He has his suitcases and sunglasses with him, since he is going on holiday, of course, and he is puffing frantically as he runs around trying to figure out which platform his train is going to leave from. It's quite funny that this fat cat has to actually run for the first time in his life. The train is pulling out of the platform but he dashes after it, throws his suitcase on the back compartment, pounces on... and makes it just in time!

With this image, whenever I picture a train station I will always see this ridiculous story of Garfield running through it and that will help me remember to say “gare”. Conversely, seeing “gare” and immediately recognising the similarity with Garfield that I assigned it, means that I will see Garfield in a train station. The recall process takes less than a second and barely slows down a nicely flowing conversation.

Every association I make like this has plenty of random background information to make the story even more dramatic and very difficult to forget. If you didn't know it already, I bet if I asked you in a few weeks time you could tell me what the French for train station was if you genuinely



visualised this story yourself! And of course if you saw or heard *gare* you could tell me what this means too – the crucial difference is that this is bidirectional! This important aspect helps a lot in a conversation, since you'll be able to both understand the other person (as with rote learning and lots of exposure in the right context) *and* actually say the words yourself.

I like to do this for as many words as possible, so the main criticism you would logically have is that it takes *too much time and work* for a single word, right? When you read through the above story it took a couple of minutes – so it sounds quite inefficient and even worse than rote learning to have to go through all of this for single words. Actually, I came up with this story *in just a few seconds* – five seconds, perhaps. Since your mind works very quickly you can create amazingly detailed stories very quickly. With practise you can do this almost instantaneously for *any* new word you see.

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It does take a bit of practice initially – you have to rediscover the talents you had as a child for being so imaginative. So, at first, it might indeed take a whole minute to create such a story as you search your mind for clever ways to make it more interesting, and you might need to be quite focused too. But after doing this several times it will come quicker and quicker and you will be able to do it on the move, and even *in the middle of a conversation*.

People always ask me how I can learn so much by pure conversation, rather than locking myself in my room and studying the language – this is one of the most important ways I do so. I use context to figure out what a new word means (or simply ask the meaning) when hearing it from a native, and apply a clever association in that moment. It took a lot of practice to get into that routine, but I'd describe myself as someone with generally a poor 'natural' memory (I *still* can't ever find my keys!! I should start doing some form of image association to remember where they are as I place them there...) and I still managed it, so I'm confident that you can too!

At the end of the day, just remember that this is a temporary association. I find that after I've needed to recall a word two or three times, it will just come to me immediately and I *know* the word – no translations or associations; I understand the word as meaning what it actually does, and no longer need to go via English. This certainly helps with maintaining a natural flow in the conversation.



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Other example associations I've used (more relevant to native English speakers) include

- Spanish *playa* = beach. Think of a cheesy flirty *player* walking up the beach (I thought of one in Valencia close to where I lived, rather than “a beach” to make the association more powerful) in his swimming trunks showing off his muscles chatting up all the girls. *Playa* and (beach) *player*.
- Czech *prvni* = first. Take the word and add vowels to make it pronounceable and more familiar and in my case I got *pro van*. I imagined a *professional van* driver winning *first* place in the van Olympics, with a heap of silly details to make it easier to recall.
- Thai greeting / hello, romanised as *Sawadee*. The first part sounds almost like how a Brit would pronounce *sour*, so I imagined a British tourist on Ko Phi Phi island going to a café (I even picture precisely which café to make more of an impact on my memory) and ordering *tea* (almost sounds like *dee*) as the first thing he would say to any Thai waiter he'd meet. He would dramatically spit it out on top of the waiter after taking a sip since the milk in it had gone sour – *sour tea* = *sawadee* and since it's the first thing he would ever say, that's *hello*. Rudely spitting tea all over a local is such a powerful image that it would come to me very quickly.

With practice, I have learned to think of an association for any new term I come across, sometimes by changing the pronunciation slightly or being very imaginative with the association, as seen in the examples.

This *can be learned*. Give it a try when you see a new word you'd like to learn! It's an excellent way of making language learning more fun while still remaining very practical. When you learn to do this quickly, you can potentially learn thousands of words much quicker.

If you'd like more ideas, there are several suggestions for basic vocabulary in French, German, Italian, Polish, and Spanish at <http://www.memorista.com/> – the associations are even more powerful when you come up with them yourself, using parts of your own life in the association. Most of the associations I use would never work with other people, but that doesn't matter – make it interesting in your own personal way!

Give it a try in Worksheet 6!



Using music to remember phrases

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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!)



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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!

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.

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Making time

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Another “resource” at your disposal is the huge amount of time that you are not taking advantage of. Yes, I know that you're really busy – aren't we all! Work, family, friends, hobbies and past-times, errands to run, shopping, shower, cleaning, sleeping, and any other responsibilities – it's a wonder we have time for anything!

No matter who you are – the busiest CEO of a company or a student with endless assignments to complete – there is time that you are *wasting* that you can take advantage of to improve your language skills.

The best way to get back huge segments of your day to take advantage of, is to eliminate pointless activities from your life. I've already suggested that watching TV in your native language is probably not contributing much to your life projects – what else do you do regularly that simply does *not* contribute to your life in any positive way? Think about them and *eliminate them* from your daily schedule. If you completed one of the early worksheet exercises about what you do every day, you might notice something that you don't actually *need* to do. If you tell yourself you are “relaxing” then consider if the activity ultimately lets you relax in the long term or if its just a short-term fix.

When you remove pointless activities from your daily routine, you'll have that extra bit of time for the important stuff! Next is to look at the things you simply have to do, but are still wasting time: waiting!

You wait for the bus/metro/train to arrive, you wait *in* it while going to work/school or home, you wait in the supermarket queue/line, you wait in a traffic jam in your car, you wait when ordering coffee in the morning, you wait for your water to boil if you prepare it yourself, you wait for your friend to arrive, you wait at the doctor's/dentist's, you even wait for ten or so seconds in lifts,



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elevators, at traffic lights, when waiting for something to load on your computer, for someone to answer the door after you knock, etc.

In most of these situations you might actually be alone – so if you can't talk to someone, what do you do? Stare into space? Read advertisements around you? Twiddle your thumbs? Press the pedestrian cross or lift button in frustration that nothing has happened yet? These little segments of our day fly by unutilised and actually add up to a *huge amount* of **time wasted**. You can't avoid these situations – they are natural parts of your day.

For most people, these little segments are annoyances – why is the other person so late? Why does there have to be so many people ahead of me in the supermarket? Why did my computer have to crash to be rebooted *now* of all times? Waiting in frustration is simply what we end up doing – considering how much time *per day* we spend doing this, this is an unneeded source of stress!

I am actually *happy* when these occasions arise! Seriously – if someone is arriving a little late, or they messed up my order at a restaurant and have to prepare the food again, or if I just missed the bus and the next one won't come for fifteen minutes – rather than cursing at my “bad luck”, and adding stress to my life by being angry during this time, I think to myself – *great! Another chance to study some vocabulary!*

I very rarely sit down at a desk with a highlighter pen “studying” vocabulary in the traditional sense. I simply “don't have the time” with everything else I need to do during the day. All of my study is done *in these waiting situations*, because they tend to add up to a *lot* of time (especially if you live in certain countries that are more “flexible” with the concept of punctuality).

This means that all you need to do is make sure your study material is portable. Most of my time in initial weeks in a country is focused on learning *phrases*, so I have a small phrasebook in my pocket. If I am already speaking *OK*, but I need to focus on grammar (don't do this in early stages!) then I might have a print-out of conjugations or preposition rules, folded up. In situations where listening is preferable (such as in your car), then have an audio course, or even better, a podcast, in the target language.



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Some languages also have vocabulary books to study that separate words into categories for studying, which makes them easier to go through systematically, although in early stages the dictionary at the back of the phrasebook is small enough to feel a sense of achievement in completing its essential list of words of a single letter of the alphabet in a single sitting.

You simply swipe out the paper/small book, open it up on the right page and apply the words to memory or test yourself on them until the waiting time is over. Alternatively, you turn on your MP3 player and listen to the audio. This can amount to *hours* of study a day considering how much time the typical person wastes!

This is what I have been doing for most of the last few years and it has been very effective! However, I have also recently discovered a great improvement to this: *Spaced Repetition Software*.

SRS is an information presentation method that gives you the information before you would forget it and makes sure that it stays constantly fresh in your mind. You can install a free version of this on your computer using the [Anki](#) application. One of the interviews included that I conducted was with Damien Elmes, the developer of this system, who explains how SRS can be useful.

Studying on your computer can be very helpful, but is not the focus of this section – we need to study on the go! So if you have an iPhone/iPod Touch, Android device or Nintendo DS (for offline use, i.e. so you don't have to use the Internet to study), or some other mobile device *with* Internet access (that is presumably not expensive to use), then you can actually use this device to *study on* using the SRS system.

This way you are utilising those two-minute windows that add up quickly, while also taking advantage of a presentation system that decides what words you need to learn based on how hard they are and constantly tests you on this. Randomly deciding what words to study yourself in a phrasebook is fine, but this way you will waste *even less time*, since you won't see words again that you definitely know, and will be constantly asked difficult key words that you *need* to learn.

To use these devices, check out the link above and see how to install them on your device (or access the online interface using an otherwise Internet enabled device), and add “decks” that are publicly available – or create your own on the online account to study from.

Free ways to find natives without travelling

Of course, I'm back once again to the best resource of all – the natives themselves! If you are in the country already, you will be surrounded by them and there will be *plenty* of opportunities to speak! Just make sure to get out of your shell and talk to as many people as often as possible!

However, what if you can't travel right now? Should you just focus on studying until you are ready to practise when you travel “some day”? Hardly! There are thousands of FREE ways to speak *right now* that you might not have tried yet!

The first one is in-person tandems (language exchanges). If you go to a local university and check out advertisement boards there, you might find an exchange student looking to improve their grasp on your language and be able to get in touch with them.

What usually happens, though, is that native speakers in your country will have ample chance to practise and might already be speaking well enough not to need help in your language. In this case, you can propose an exchange for something *e/se* that you can teach them.

Can you play the piano/guitar? Cook? Code webpages? Practise yoga? Play chess? Whatever your talent, there are people who want to learn it, especially if you are quite good at it. But even if you aren't at the professional level, they'll still want to learn from you... all they have to do is promise to teach you their language for half of the exchange!



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If natives are particularly difficult to come across where you live, then you can specify “fluent speaker” in your search, especially if you are starting off. Don't forget how much fluent (non-native) speakers can help us in our learning path! Sometimes they can even be more helpful than the natives themselves.

If you are in a major city then check out the free advertisement sites on [Craigslist](#) (look at the list on the right to see your country/city) or [eBay classifieds](#) (click “eBay classifieds group” at the bottom to see a list of countries if your city isn't on the home page). Usually the place to find / create an advertisement for a language exchange would be in a category such as *services offered* --> *lessons & tutoring* for example. You can also use the same sites to find paid private lessons for much cheaper than you would through many language schools.

The second (much more unconventional) approach to finding natives to speak with, when you are not in their country, that I have used very frequently is [couchsurfing](#). This site is used by (mostly) young travellers on a budget who would like to stay with locals rather than in hostels or hotels.

It may sound iffy, but the site has an excellent references and vouching system so you can see that the person is trustworthy. I've hosted over a *thousand* different couchsurfers from all over the world and have never had *any* problems with them.

The advantages to the traveller are obvious, but the host can also get a *huge* amount out of it! If you host people that speak your target language (and a few that don't, for the purposes of getting used to the site and earning your own references) then you will have someone very motivated to help you (you are giving them free accommodation, after all) and you don't even have to leave your house to be able to practise! A spare bed, fold-out couch, mattress, or even sometimes just space on the floor; is all you need to offer in most cases.

Even if the concept of hosting someone is daunting (read through the site before you dismiss that idea!) you can still use it to meet up with travellers at Couchsurfing's regular meetings in major cities. Go to the Meetings page, *as well as* the Group page for your city, and see if there are any taking place soon! You can see from those confirmed to go whether there are natives of the language you wish to practise travelling through. Of course, you know from this guide how to convince them to help you!



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Another website specifically for that purpose of *meet-ups* is [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com). This one tends to be more popular in English-speaking countries – in major cities there are very regular meetings to practise particular languages. These are great places to go to meet those going through the same struggle as you, and you might even run into a few natives!

You can take this even further and see that on basically *any* modern social networking website, you will find meetups that may include particular language-learning themes. For example, in Facebook if you perform a search for your city name followed by the language name, and then click “Events” you may see that someone has already set up such a meeting!

Otherwise, if you know of online forums relevant to your city, check them out! If you don't find any language meetings then it's time to *take the initiative* and create one yourself! Spread the word and people will come. You don't even need the Internet – just ask your friends if they know anyone who speaks your target language and you might just be two handshakes away from a potential language exchange.

The *third* way you can practise a language without needing to travel is entirely online. You may not be meeting up in person, but you can have full video and/or audio conversations that are almost as good as talking with them in person. Thanks to the Internet, it doesn't matter *where* you are on the planet, you can always find natives to speak with!

There are actually *too many* sites that let you do this!! Some examples include [polyglot language exchange](#), [Chatonic](#), [Babelyou](#), [Sharedtalk](#), [italki](#), [My language exchange](#), [Lenguajero](#) for Spanish, and [vraiment](#) for French.

Quite a lot of people use [LiveMocha](#) and [Busuu](#) for this too (although I wouldn't recommend the courses on these sites for learning the language they do have huge communities of people looking for language exchanges).

These sites usually have paid aspects to them, but that is separate to the basic search feature. If you find a native willing to help you, all you need to do is exchange [Skype](#) details and start chatting with one another for free outside of the system.

It's certainly awkward to talk to a stranger online at first, but if you make it a regular occurrence they will become your friend and things will get much easier. Even though it's online, this is another way of jumping in the deep end and getting used to *conversations*. Just make sure that they are helping you as much as you are helping them!



Online resources

Part Five Learning resources

While the focus of this guide is on speaking, it's important not to forget other aspects of a language. I find the [LingQ](#) website to be a great free way to practise reading and finding podcasts to listen to for several major languages. It is pretty user friendly, but you can find [a detailed review](#) of its advantages (and disadvantages unrelated to the reading system) on my site.

The podcasts aspect of LingQ is a great resource for downloading audio to listen to on the move. If you can't find what you want here, you can also download podcasts in the target language (not directed at learners, but at *natives*) by going to radio stations in that language, searching online or going into iTunes. Many podcasts are completely free and will be available in themes that will be more interesting to you (news items, technology updates etc.)

Another resource I like to use is Google Image Search *rather than* a dictionary. The problem with bilingual dictionaries is that they require you to think *via* your mother tongue. This will always slow you down when the ideal situation is to think directly in the language itself. Ideally, you will see an image of what the word represents (obviously much better for items rather than certain prepositions and abstract qualities) and associate the word with the *image* rather than with its translation.

Give this a try! Go to the Google site for your target language (google.es for Spanish, google.fr for French, etc.), click the option to change to that language (if it is still in your language by default) and search for your term and then click the “images” link (picture of a camera) on the left. Having Google search in that language will make sure it provides the correct images.

This is one way that you should try to keep *everything in the target language*. You will lose your flow of the language when you keep switching back and forth.



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You can also use the basic Google search as a *grammar check*. To find out if the word is masculine, feminine (or neuter), what case ending works after a particular preposition, etc... I usually use Google rather than looking it up.

In this case you would need to use quotation marks “ ” around what you are searching for. If you want to find out if you need to say *commencer faire*, *commencer à faire*, or *commencer de faire* in French, for example, just search for each one. You will usually get *some* results for the wrong one (the words may come together in less common ways for example), but in this case you'd get 100 times as much for the *à* version.

To see if *coche* is masculine or feminine, you can use the dictionaries below, *or* just put “*coche pequeño*” and “*coche pequeña*” (masculine then feminine) into Google and see which one gives a dramatically higher number of results.

Next – you need to check your spelling! You can use Google's spell checker (*Did you mean..?*), but this would be tedious for individual words. Luckily, *Firefox* (and other browsers) and *Open Office* come with excellent *foreign language* dictionaries that you can install for free and switch between *very easily*. Even professional and expensive solutions like MS Office's spell checker can be very limited in what languages you can apply, so you are actually *better off* going for the free version.

When writing a letter I use [Open Office](#) and [add the language](#) option I require (quite a lot of majority *and* minority languages included) and get a spell-checker, thesaurus, and hyphenation check. This will automatically indicate when you have written something incorrectly as you type, and suggest a replacement. If you keep making the same mistakes you will soon get the idea! Automatic corrections like this are an excellent way to learn. Firefox also makes it very easy to install other dictionaries to check your spelling as you write in forms/e-mails, and even inside facebook chat!

Since I use chat programs a lot to practice my foreign languages, I have installed the chat client [pidgin](#) – it's one program that works with MSN, facebook chat, Skype, AIM, ICQ, Google Chat and *many* others; and the best part for me has been the easy-to-change language selection for spell check to show you instantly if you are typing something wrong.

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Sometimes you can't do a Google search so easily to find the answer to your question and you really need a native to help you out. Luckily, there are sites specifically designed for that purpose! [Lang 8](#) is for submitting short text that you'd like to get corrected by a native. And if you'd like to know how a sentence is pronounced by a native? Submit it to [Rhinospike](#)! Both sites are completely free (sign up first), and work quicker if you submit your own corrections and recordings to help those interested in your own language.

To hear just how single words or compound words sound, as pronounced by a native, search for them on [Forvo](#).

At times the question you need to ask is a technical question about the language. In this case you should check out the *many online* active forums that other learners and natives use and can answer your questions very quickly!

One of my favourites are those at [wordreference.com](#) for explanations on a wide range of languages. But if you do a Google search for *Language name* and *forum* and have a quick look to see how active the forums are for giving tips in that language, you can sign up yourself (once again, usually completely free) and ask and expect to get useful responses quick quickly!

What about online dictionaries? This can largely depend on the language, so it's a good idea to ask on the forum what dictionaries they recommend for the one you are studying. However, there are certain *multilingual* dictionaries that give a very good answer to a broad range of languages!

One is [Wikipedia](#). It isn't just a free encyclopaedia (already an impressive resource), but is an encyclopaedia in *hundreds* of languages! A vast amount of articles are actually linked between these languages, so you can look up the word (either in your native language, or in the [target language's version of Wikipedia](#)) and scroll down a bit and look left and you will see the translations available! This can be especially handy for many terms not available in other dictionaries.

Wordreference (linked above) is great not just for its forum but for its vast dictionary. It's free because of the rather annoying advertising on the side, so I disable this by installing adblock plug-ins in my browser. This dictionary gives several different translations, suggests the context, and even conjugates verbs and recognises them within search terms!



If you are looking up more technical vocabulary, then check out the [Proz term search](#) results (using the Kudoz option) or the [InterActive Terminology for Europe](#) or [MyMemory](#) for technical/legal/medical or otherwise more professional and very specific terminology.

As suggested before, you should try to change the language of all of your interfaces (telephone, computer games, computer) to be in the target language. This *virtual immersion* will be a huge help! Some particular programs like Skype can be changed in an instant. Changing your web browser's presentation language is also easy enough (unless it's Internet Explorer, in which case an entirely new download is required). There are plug-ins to change the language in Firefox quickly and Google Chrome makes it very easy to [change the interface language](#).

On a Mac, Safari's display language is linked to the system language settings. For options to change the entire system's language settings, go to "System Preferences..." and click "International".

Changing the browser's default language will ultimately change the language of many websites that are available in those languages (a lot of sites like Google check the browsers language and decide based on that what language to present to the user). Other sites like Facebook need a manual change to settings, but this is *very* easy (Account settings -> Language).

In Windows changing the language of the entire Operating System is a little complicated and usually requires the user to have the professional version. However, you can install the [Ubuntu](#) operating system and change its presentation language in an instant. Ubuntu is a flavour of Linux that can be installed on any computer for free and is easy to get used to. You can have it run side-by-side with Windows, choosing one or the other at boot-up.

Using these techniques of *virtual immersion* is an important step in the right direction!

Part Five Learning resources

Part Six

Particular language issues





Why do they have to have word genders?

Part Six Particular language issues

When you start to learn certain languages that use noun genders, the first question that comes to mind (at least to English speakers) is *why*? It seems like pointless extra information to add to a language.

Why is the moon feminine in Spanish and French, but masculine in German? Why is the word “masculinity” actually usually feminine? How is it possible for a girl to be neuter in German?

Looking at it this way it is indeed way too confusing! It gets worse when you consider that there is anywhere up to about a *million* words in a language, so learning the gender for each of them is a huge amount of work! If you were to use my association techniques mentioned above for *every single word* to remember if it is masculine or feminine (or neuter) it would start to get quite tedious, indeed!

My teachers always suggested that I learn by repetition by always saying the word with its definite article (*der/die/das* in German) until it would sink in. This helps, but is not efficient enough!

Rather than look at as pointless extra work (remember, the wrong attitude will always hold you back!), it's better to realise that it's not the *objects* that have a gender, it's the *words*. This really does make a huge difference.

A *word* can easily be masculine or feminine and have nothing to do with actual sexual gender, or necessarily being “manly” or “girly”. These are just convenient titles for different categories, and



may as well be *yin and yang* or *positive and negative*. Other than actually being associated with people of that gender (like father, sister, girlfriend), these *gender* associations are rarely ever going to help.

The reason you can think of this slightly differently is that a *word* is made up of a group of letters and its *ending* can help it go into a particular category. The *ending* (or the entire word when it is short) is almost always what is actually influencing what “gender” it is.

The gender of the concepts behind these words are rarely connected (unless the endings themselves are similar). So you should actually study *word endings* to see the patterns for gender associations. Most of the time this will guide you in the right direction and you can get at least 90 percent of the gender right just by spending a few hours learning the guidelines (usually available in most good grammar books).

For example, words for machines, and especially concepts (–ness words in English, like happiness, freedom, etc.) tend to be feminine, not because of the concepts themselves, but because of the word endings associated with them (–*té* in French, –*dad* in Spanish, –*keit* in German, –*ost* in Czech, –*ation/ación/azione* etc. endings in Romance languages).

Learning these endings is not actually a huge amount of work – there may only a dozen or so typical ones at most, that will generally cover the vast majority of words, depending on the language.

If you really don't know the gender, don't let this hold you back from speaking it! Just make a guess, and there is usually a 33 percent or 50 percent chance of you being right. If you are wrong, I promise the world won't come to an end! The native speaker will tell of this mistake, or you will learn it as you improve your skills. The important thing is to say something and to keep the conversation flowing.

Part Six

Particular language issues



Instant vocabulary

Part Six Particular language issues

While you can use the image association and musical technique to get some vocabulary and phrases into memory, there is still quite a lot of work to do.

That's why it's important to know that you *already speak* some of that language. No matter what language it is, one of the first things to do is to find out what *cognates* exist with your mother tongue.

No matter what the language is – Japanese, Swedish, Tagalog or Portuguese – there are words that you already know. Each language is not an island – it is influenced by politics, technology, trends, religion, history and many other things that us humans tend to share internationally.

When you start learning a language, if you look out for these cognates you will start *immediately* with hundreds of words, even in distant languages.

For example, *in Italian you can turn on your **computer**, and in (Brazilian) Portuguese you move the **mouse**, in Russian you connect to the Интернет (exact transliteration of Internet, И=I, н=n and р=r, can you read it now?), and in Japanese you check your Eメール (second part transliteration, “me-ru”, their way of approximating the pronunciation of “mail”), the name of the program you use to surf the net in Turkish is Mozilla Firefox, and you may use “Microsoft Windows” in the Somali language, or perhaps “Linux” in Euskara to do this.*

Brand names and technology can give you a huge boost in any country. When I am out on the town in *any* country, if I request a “Coca Cola” (or Pepsi) I will usually get it. If I want a *pizza* then that word is the one I should use across the world. Now, you may have to pronounce them slightly differently, but trying to say them with less of an accent (see below) will usually help people to understand them.



Part Six Particular language issues

If you happen to be learning *Romance languages* (French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, etc.) then you get thousands of words for free (as an English speaker) due to an influx of French-based vocabulary during the Norman Conquest of England, and Latin vocabulary due to science and religion.

These words tend to be used in more formal situations in English, so if you think of a synonym for the word you want to say that is actually a *more technical* way of saying it, it may very well be precisely the same in the target language.

*So if someone knocks on your door, you can tell them to come in, **or** you could say enter. French: entrer, Spanish: entrar. If you want share your thoughts with someone to show them your point of view, you could also share your opinion and show them your perspective (Italian: opinione, Portuguese: perspectiva) (although here, “point de vue” in French is also not far off!). Instead of showing someone a city, you could be their guide (same in French). Learning vocabulary could be easy, but it’s better when it’s “simple”!*

There are also patterns of particular word-endings working a huge amount of the time. For example, words ending in *-tion* in English, are almost always the same in Latin languages. Action, nation, precipitation, solution, frustration, tradition, communication, extinction and **thousands more** *-tion* words are written exactly the same in French (although the pronunciation changes a bit) and in other languages only change slightly: Spanish is *-ción*, Italian is *-zione* and Portuguese is *-ção*.

There’s also *-tude* (like gratitude, magnitude), *-sion* (explosion, expression), *-ment* (encouragement, segment), *-age* (garage, camouflage) and *loads more*.

You will occasionally run across a *false friend*, but this is the *exception* and you will learn these quite quickly. To get an idea of some words that are actually written exactly the same in English and French (and would almost always be almost exactly the same in other Romance languages) look at this list of 1,700 examples in [French](#).

1,700 is not a bad start, but that is actually just for *true cognates* of not a single letter being different. If you are flexible enough to see what the word looks similar to (*exemple, hélicoptère...*

porto, capitano... astronomía, Saturno, etc.) you can bring that number to *tens of thousands* of words!



Accent reduction

Part Six Particular language issues

Once you are speaking confidently in a language, and even as you are improving towards speaking confidently, you should try hard to have reduced your foreign accent. This can make you easier to understand, as well as making the listener more comfortable with speaking to you.

Having less of a strong accent has dramatically helped me to integrate better in foreign cultures. As with other aspects of learning a language, it *can* be broken down and analysed.

Your accent is made up of many different components such as word stress, sentence intonation, rhythm, and even use of particular expressions. Even within a language, each dialect has its own accent and peculiarities.

The best thing you can do here is to find a native and to have them correct you in the mistakes that you are making, as well as correcting yourself by repeating phrases aloud after hearing them spoken by a native. Try to hear the musicality of the sentence as well as its pronunciations

Sounds that don't exist in your mother tongue, but that do in the foreign language, *can* be learned. It just takes practice. Usually, the sound can be explained to you in terms of mouth/tongue positions, and you might have to find a native that is particularly patient (or simply pay them) to sit down with you for a few hours until you eliminate particular accent issues. This is one of those things with no quick shortcut, but that does need to be practised. So, I do all of this practise intensively to make sure I can speak correctly sooner rather than later!

If your native language is English, then one sound you will want to work on *immediately* is the *r* letter (especially if you are learning European languages that also have this letter). An English *r* sounds nothing like the equivalent *r* of the foreign language, and you will need to train yourself to roll it or make it guttural.



[Here are ways](#) to roll the r (as in Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Slavic languages, and even non-European languages). You actually have to think of it more like an English / than our *r*.

Other languages, like French, make it more guttural, so the sound comes from about same position in your throat as it does for the letter *g*. Once again, a native can explain precisely how to make these sounds and tell you when you say it better.

Part Six

Particular language issues



INTERVIEWS

There are several hours of interviews included with the *Language Hacking Guide* that I am sure **you will enjoy! You can listen to discussions with the following people:**

- [Stu Jay Raj](#) – a very experienced polyglot who covers many topics with me including memory techniques. Stu Jay has had his own TV show, has worked regularly as an interpreter for Miss Universe and speaks dozens of languages. Interview time: 54 minutes.
- Khatzumoto from All Japanese All the Time (www.alljapaneseallthetime.com). 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 (<http://www.youtube.com/user/laoshu505000>) 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.



CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, no matter how good your method and ideas are, the best thing you can do by far is to learn from the natives themselves and to get them to help you.

I hope that you have enjoyed this guide, and that you will use it just as a starting point to discovering many other methods that happen to work better for you.

If there are any parts of this you feel like I didn't go into enough detail on, let me know by writing me an e-mail at benny@irishpolyglot.com.

Even if you don't have any questions, I would love to hear your thoughts about the *Language Hacking Guide*. If you have any other ways of learning a language that I should consider, let me know! I am always open to learning new interesting approaches.

If you purchased this guide to help you with your first language, then please, especially get in touch with me to tell me that you've had your first conversation with a native much sooner than you thought you would ;)

Make sure to share your thoughts of this guide on Facebook and Twitter! You can follow more of my language-hacking tips and adventures as I apply them on my blog www.fluentin3months.com and on Twitter [@irishpolyglot](https://twitter.com/irishpolyglot)

Looking forward to hearing from you!

- Benny Lewis