

ACTIVITIES and STRATEGIES

For Everyday Language Learners

A compilation of 56 tips, ideas and activities from The Everyday Language Learner with which you can learn ANY language



Aaron G Myers

My name is Aaron Myers and I am the author behind [The Everyday Language Learner blog and website](#). I work hard to create content that will help average, everyday sorts of people learn another language. My passion is to help you be more effective, more efficient and to have a lot more fun learning another language.



My hope is that *Activities and Strategies for Everyday Language Learners* will be a big part of that and I want to thank you for purchasing it today.

Thanks again and blessings on your language learning journey!

-Aaron

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Introduction

One of the challenges of a written blog is the issue of navigation, cataloguing and keeping track of all the good content. So much of what is written is hidden in the archives and difficult to find.

At The Everyday Language Learner I have tried to create categories and other organizational tools to help readers find the content and resources they need.

But it's a difficult task to do well.

I have been especially troubled that, having put so much work into sharing new learning ideas, activities and strategies with readers, many of these are simply lost in the backwaters of the archives, no longer helping anyone.

It seemed then a good idea to create a collection of the best of the blog, focusing especially on language learning activities and strategies.

And that is what this book is: a compilation of 56 tips, ideas and activities from my writings with which you you can use to learn **any** language.

The book is divided into four sections.

In section one, *General Tips and Ideas*, I share articles about independent language learning in general. There are a lot of good articles here to help you reframe and refocus as independent, self-directed learners.

It is the final three sections though that are the meat and potatoes of this book.

They are the go to resource for those times when you just don't know what to do next to learn the language or when you find yourself in need of some new activity to spice up your language learning program.

A learning activity is a project, exercise or drill designed to create the optimum learning environment where active learning can take place.

These next three sections are filled with specific learning activities that you can use in your personal study time, in one on one time with a native speaker and out in the community.

Personal study times are those times when you work at learning the language alone and on your own.

Lesson time is when you have one on one time with a native speaker who is working with you to help you learn their language.

Community time is the unscripted time out in the community amongst native speakers.

All three of these learning environments are important for your continued success as a language learner and I have compiled a collection of great learning activities that can be utilized in each.

You can search through these by simply clicking on a heading in the table of contents. This book is designed to be used as a go to resource in your time of need rather than a book you sit down and read straight through.

Please note - there is little new content here. I have done some editorial work to clean up the writing and remove some of the elements that were used for the blog, but the main content is essentially the same as is found at the website.

There are several articles included that I wrote as guest posts for other blogs. Those are marked in the table of contents and include a link to the original article at the bottom of each post.

So while nothing here is entirely new, what I have done is organized the content into an easily accessible resource.

In the ebook version I have left links intact. These links will appear [underlined in blue](#). Some of these are affiliate links.

If you are unfamiliar with affiliate links, it only means that I think a product is worth recommending and for my recommendation, should you purchase the product, I will get a small commission. It's just another way to help me make The Everyday Language Learner a successful business, enabling me to put more time into what I love to do: help people learn languages.

I have put this guide together for language learners like myself. I hope it will be a great resource that will provide new ideas and activities that will help you take your language learning to the next level.

Before you go on and if you have not yet done so, consider stopping by the blog to subscribe. I write one article a week and won't send much more. This weekly article could be just the motivation and encouragement you need to preserve and keep at the language learning journey.

General Tips and Ideas

**Writings to inspire and empower
independent language learning.**

**[Click here to leave your review of *Activities and Strategies for
Everyday Language Learners* on Amazon.](#)**

Becoming an Independent Language Learner

Like so much in life, language learning is as much about the choices we make as it is any other one thing.

If we choose to take control of the language learning journey, to take the reins and put ourselves in charge of the choices we make, we will increase our chances of success.

If we sit back as passive learners and allow a system or a teacher to dictate the way we learn, we will be more likely to struggle.

This is the reality that I have observed.

You can take control and be more effective, more efficient and have more fun learning another language.

Or you can passively do whatever is placed before you, whatever someone else suggests is the “best way” to learn a language, putting in minimal time and struggling to do really well.

So what will it be? Which will you chose?

Arguments Against Independent Learning

Many will argue that independent, self-directed language learning just isn't realistic.

Many wonder what they would do and how they would actually learn the language.

They argue, and argue honestly, that they don't possess the expertise or the knowledge to undertake such a task.

I understand this argument. It makes sense and reflects a real challenge that all beginning language learners face.

But it also reflects another issue: language learners who lack the necessary passion and knowledge to put in the hard work required to succeed.

This is a problem, but it's not insurmountable.

That is the definition of an everyday language learner after all.

Everyday Language Learner (noun) | 'evrē,dā 'la NG gwij lærnər |

1. *an ordinary, regular person who is learning another language*
2. *someone who may not have a special love or excitement for learning another language but who wants or needs to learn it nonetheless*

If that definition describes you, then you may at times feel like disempowered language learners. You may not always know where to begin or what to do.

Thankfully, this is a challenge about which you can do something.

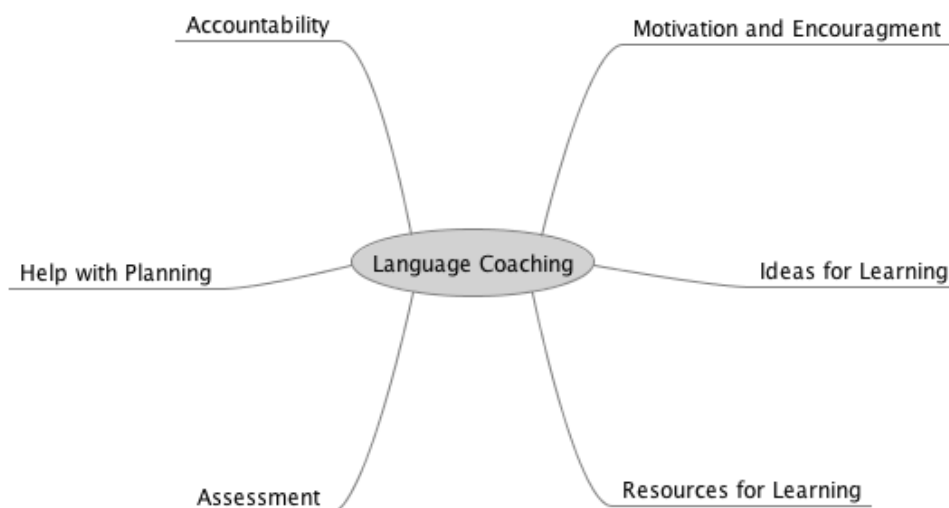
The Six Pillars of Successful Language Learning

Today I took some time to reflect on the language coaching that I do.

I have been privileged to work with a great group of individuals over the last year, helping them become better language learners who are more effective, more efficient and are having more fun on the language learning journey.

I was working to rewrite my coaching page to better reflect what I do and how I do it as a language coach. Using a new mind-mapping program that I recently discovered and love, I began to think of the main themes or ideas of my coaching.

You can see my simple mind map below.



As I worked through simplifying and thinking about how each of these categories works out in my coaching, I realized that these six ideas are the core of what I want to be doing with The Everyday Language Learner blog and I feel are really at the core of what every language learner needs in order to be successful.

I've recently been reading Stephen King's book *On Writing*, which is, you guessed it, about becoming a better writer.

He shares how he writes his first draft and then, after it is done, he goes back and tries to discover the themes and symbols that exist within the story.

I feel as though my reflection process has done the same for me.

As I look back at my coaching, at the writing I've done here at the blog and in my guides and at my own language learning journey, I realize that these are the main themes that come up again and again.

And of course they should be.

They are above the nuts and bolts of a specific language and so apply to the learning of every language.

In many ways they seem to be the pillars that support any successful language learning journey.

The Six Pillars of Success



These six pillars of success have been at the core of my own journey to master Turkish and as I reflect on the last four years, I realize that I have done best when all six have been a part of the process.

As I go back through everything that I have written here at the blog, the same pattern emerges – **I consistently write about these six ideas.**

They are at the core of the guides I've written, are scattered throughout my free course, The Ten Week Journey, and make up the prime components of nearly every coaching session I have.

I don't think one is any more or less important than any other but I do think that most who find success have all of them working for them.

They may not always realize it, but they do.

Knowledge

Of all the work I do through The Everyday Language Learner, teaching is perhaps the one aspect that I love the most.

Sharing information that will help you become self-directed, independent language learners is one of my top goals.

As a learner, becoming knowledgeable about the process of learning a new language, about the methods and activities with which we can learn new languages and about all that goes into the language learning journey is one of the most empowering steps you can take toward success.

You can find this pillar working its way into The Everyday Language Learner in:

- [The Ten Week Journey course](#) (free)
- [The Everyday Language Learner's Guide to Getting Started](#)
- [The Language Learning Activities page](#)
- [Language Learning Tips blog posts](#)
- [Blog Category: Knowledge](#)

Resources

All the desire in the world adds up to very little if you do not have the resources available to actually make your dream happen.

In the past, available resources for learning other languages were fairly limited.

Today however, resources for learning nearly every language in the world are available and often in great quantity because of the Internet.

You can build a house with a hammer and a hand saw, but it will go faster, be easier and a lot more fun if you have the best tools for the job.

Learning a new language is the same.

Finding the best resources for your learning style and life situation will inevitably make the journey more effective and efficient and you will find more success.

I've introduced you to new resources here at EDLL through:

- [The Getting Started Resource page](#)
- [The Language Specific Resource Page](#)
- [The Other Great Bloggers page](#)
- [The Ten Week Journey course](#)
- [Blog Category: Resources](#)

Encouragement

If teaching is what I love to do most, encouragement is perhaps what I am best at in my writing.

Sustaining motivation is one of the most important aspects of the language learning journey.

As a language learner, you just have to put in the time day in and day out in order to learn.

There is no way around this and it will not happen if you are not motivated to make it happen.

Creating, maintaining and protecting your motivation, commitment and a positive attitude toward learning the language then should be a serious consideration in your day to day interaction with the language.

If you haven't yet, be sure and read *Sustaining*. It is a power packed guide to help you win the battle of motivation that you can read in 20 minutes or less.

- [Blog Category: Encouragement](#)
- Read *The EDLL Guide to Sustaining* now in English, Spanish, French, Turkish or Polish [[Click here to find all versions](#)]

Planning

Setting a goal and then creating a plan to reach that goal is at the core of any successful endeavor and learning another language is no different.

For most everyday language learners though, it is tough to develop a plan because we know so little about what makes for an effective language learning program – don't we just sign up for a class and let someone else teach us?

That would be one easy route to learn the language, but in my writing I am not so much interested in finding the easiest way as I am in helping you find the best way.

And in my experience, the best way is when YOU take charge of your language learning journey.

This could of course include signing up for a class, but it should involve much more and it will involve planning.

It is said that **planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it.**

In my writing and coaching I want to give learners the tools and information to develop a plan that will be the most effective, efficient and productive route forward toward fluency in the language they are learning.

- [The Stages Series](#)
- [The EDLL Guide to Getting Started](#)
- [Blog Category: Planning](#)

Accountability

Accountability is the process through which we make sure we stick to our plan. There are many forms of accountability and individual learners all need to figure out for themselves what they need to stick to the plans that they have created to learn the language.

For some, there is sufficient internal willpower to keep at it. Others are having so much fun that accountability is a mute point.

For most of us though, we need a host of accountability strategies in order to follow through with our plans.

Without these most of us quickly fade away and find ourselves floundering in a sea of mediocrity wishing we could do better.

It is important that you know yourself, that you know what you need to succeed and are able to put sufficient accountability in place to see you through to the achievement of your goal.

More ideas about accountability can be found in:

- [Language Coaching](#)
- [Blog Category: Accountability](#)
-

Assessment

If planning helps us develop the path toward our goal and accountability helps keep us on that path, assessment is the tool that tells us if our path is actually going in the right direction.

And this, as you can imagine, is extremely important.

Traditionally, language assessment has been primarily focused on assessing a learner's ability in the language.

Periodic assessments of this nature are important because they show us if we are moving forward or not. But assessments of language proficiency used alone are limited and there is much we can do to create a more robust assessment process.

A better assessment will also evaluate what you are doing to learn the language – the activities and methods you are using – and help you to make adjustments on the journey to become more effective and efficient in what you are doing.

I created the [Guide to Self-Assessment](#) tool in order to give everyday language learners the ability to do just this, to take control of the assessment of not only their ability to use the language, but also of their personal plan for learning the language.

By evaluating both, language learners can maximize their ability to learn the language as fast and as fluently as they can.

- [The EDLL Guide to Self-Assessment](#)
- [Language Coaching](#)

- [Blog Category: Assessment](#)

So there you have it, the six pillars to successful language learning.

It is my opinion that if you can build each of these into your language learning journey, you will be more successful.

Growing as Independent

Language Learners

I should say that independent language learning is much more about attitude than it is about your choice in language learning methods.

Many independent learners sign up for classes, use Rosetta Stone or buy grammar books.

The difference is that they are choosing to do so because they have determined that it is the best way to maximize their personal learning style, their available time and their passions and interests.

It's not because they don't know of anything else to do.

That's the difference.

It's time to stop complying with the system and draw your own map. Stop settling for what is good enough and start creating art that matters [or learning languages better]. Then, and only then, will you have achieved your potential.

-Seth Godin, Linchpin

No one magically steps into the life of the independent, self-directed language learner.

Some find themselves there because they are passionate about learning languages. It's their joy and they find the process of learning a language nearly as rewarding as the end product itself.

Others, the rest of us perhaps, need to learn it. We must work hard to educate ourselves, to establish habits and to surround ourselves with lots of high quality comprehensible input.

If you are not there yet, you too can learn to be an independent, self-directed language learner.

You can take the small steps necessary to get started and develop the perseverance to stick with it. And you can get started today.

Here are a few ideas to help develop the independent language learner mindset:

- 1. Learn from others.** Find a few good blogs written by language learners and begin to read back through to find the tips and ideas that helped the writer become a better language learner. The Everyday Language Learner is of course a good place to start. I also highlight a lot of other great blogs [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).
- 2. Learn from others part 2.** Find a friend who has successfully learned another language and learn from them. Listen to what they did. Find what works for you and get started.
- 3. Learn from others part 3.** Join a language learners forum and become actively involved in learning from others and

sharing your own experience as well. There are some great forums at: [The Mezzofanti Guild](#), [Fluent in Three Months](#), [The Omniglot Forum](#) or [How to Learn any Language](#).

4. **Sign up for a course** focused on helping you begin to become an independent language learner. You could start with my [Ten Week Journey](#) email course or hop over to Multilingual Living and work through their [Challenge 180](#).
5. **Pick up a book or two on the subject.** I've reviewed a few like [The Whole World Guide to Language Learning](#). You could also check out perhaps the best selling guide on the internet, Benny the Irish Polyglot's [Speak From Day One](#) [affiliate link]. **I too have written a comprehensive guide which you can check out –** [The EDLL Guide to Getting Started](#).
6. **Check out some of the many Youtube channels** about language learning. Mine is focused on giving you tips and language learning activities and is [The EDLL Youtube Channel](#). Other favorites are: [LingoSteve](#), [ProfASAr](#), [Moses McCormick](#).

10 Essential Tools for Language Learners

My son and daughter have learned to speak Turkish without ever thinking about the learning process and without ever consulting a dictionary, reviewing a flashcard or reading this blog.

And while it hurts my pride to think that my five and seven year olds are not avid readers of The Everyday Language Learner, their learning Turkish without a single resource outside of their native speaking friends highlights the fact that there is little that we actually need to learn another language.

As adult learners though, we have cognitive abilities beyond those of children. We can create systems to discover, classify, and review new concepts. **We have better long term memory.**

And where kids are dependent on the cruel hand of chance for receiving comprehensible input, adults have the ability to be intentional about finding and exposing ourselves to high quality language learning opportunities.

I believe that if I as an adults were to have received as much input as my kids did – six hours a day, five days a week at pre-school – and if I were to have lived with the same lack of concern for what others think about me as my kids did – I would have learned Turkish much faster than they.

As it is, while I know a lot more Turkish words and expressions than either of them at this point, they speak it much better than I.

While we are all still working on figuring out how not to care what others think about us as we learn the language – something second language acquisition people call the “affective filter”, we can do more to affect both the quality and the quantity of the language we are hearing, reading and seeing. As adults then we have the ability to take control of our learning and the input we receive in ways that kids do not.

In today’s post then I want to introduce you to ten essential tools for the independent language learner. These are the tools and resources that have helped me maximize my language learning and are the ten things I would encourage all language learners to obtain as they begin to learn another language. There are other great online resources as well, but in this list I’ll be focusing on those things which you’ll need to either find or purchase.

My kids prove that you don’t need anything on this list save for a native speaking friend, but as adults with the ability to take control of our learning, these resources can help us do just that.

1. Pocket Dictionary

In today’s Internet age and instant access to online dictionaries, it may seem strange to put the ubiquitous pocket dictionary at the top of the list. But the pocket dictionary is important for what it does for you as well as what it represents.

A pocket dictionary allows you to navigate your new language out in the community. It gives you access to concepts and conversations in the flip of a few pages and goes with you as a good friend who has your back where ever you might venture.

It also gives native speakers a tool to help you and you'll often find your trusty pocket dictionary being taken from your hands and then being thrust back, a pointing finger indicating a word your native speaking friend wants you to know.

Your pocket dictionary is also important for what it represents.

We learn a new language so we can speak it with people and the pocket dictionary is all about being with and speaking with people, real people. Every time you see your pocket dictionary you should remember this, remember, and then get out and begin interacting with native speakers.

2. Pocket Phrasebook

Where the pocket dictionary opens up new words to language learners, the phrasebook opens up whole new opportunities.

A good phrase book will give you instant inroads into the culture so that you can quickly begin the adventure of exploring the country.

A good phrase book is also a great sampling of the language and can be a springboard for further learning. It is unfortunate that most phrasebooks lack the phrases necessary to unlock the language.

They will help you order a beer and help you find the toilet, but none that I know of help you access more language. A brief section of password phrases would be a welcome addition to the language phrasebooks that are out there.

([learn more about password phrases](#))

3. Notebooks

One of the most important jobs of a language learner is to capture new material so that it can be reviewed and retained.

A small pocket sized notebook is a must then for language learners. Carry this with you at all times so that you can write down anything that you do not know or understand that you should know.

These entries then can become to focus of study time and the topic of discussion with native speakers. ([See Write it Down](#))

I also think that writing regularly in the language is an important part of a maximized language learning program and so a larger notebook is also an essential tool. I wrote extensively right away in Turkish and also see a notebook filled with your 'journals' in the language can be an great assessment tool and a real encouragement.

Finally, I always had a third notebook that I used exclusively for planning my lessons and my own personal language learning program as an independent language learner. By planning, I found that I used my time more effectively.

Having recorded my plans, I was also able to look back and review what I was doing and in the process, figure out what worked best for me.

4. ipod

Whether it be an [ipod](#) or any other mp3 device, having the ability to carry hours and hours of listening material is one opportunity you do not want to miss.

I am amazed to remember that even ten years ago most language learners were dealing with cassette players.

Some of you are too young to even remember cassette players, but if you do, you can appreciate the power of the ipod to store in an organized manner thousands of hours of audio.

Listening and listening often is an important part of a maximized language learning program and an mp3 player like the ipod is essential to make this happen.

([get your ipod here](#))

5. Digital Recording Device

Today, most mp3 players and smart phones have adequate recording abilities for the everyday language learner.

Listening to audio files that others have created is good, but listening to audio that you have created – with the help of a native speaker – is the best. Making your own recordings will give you the very best chance to create comprehensible input.

You can record answers to grand tour questions, create [handcrafted audio](#) with your own writing and can record all the password phrases you can think of.

6. Introductory Book

Another essential resource is an introductory book to the language. My favorite is the Teach Yourself Series.

A good book will explain the basics of grammar, offer insights into the culture and introduce important phrases and expressions used by native speakers. It should also have exercises you can work through and a good glossary of terms for easy reference.

(Here's [my review of the Teach Yourself Series](#))

7. Reading Material

Reading is an important part of learning another language.

Reading extensively allows the learner to take in large amounts of the language at your own rate and on your own time.

It is important then to find high quality reading material in the target language that will help you be a more effective language learner.

8. Assessment Tool

One of the great difficulties independent language learners face is in knowing how they are doing.

In the classroom, a teacher assesses progress and helps students know what they are doing well at and where they need improvement.

The ability to know how you are doing does much to help you to create a focused plan for your learning and helps sustain motivation.

As an independent language learner of Turkish, I was frustrated to no end wondering if what I was doing was working and if I was really progressing as quickly as I could.

I used a lot of different resources – the [ACTFL](#) and [CEFR](#) are both great self assessment tools to get started with.

In the end though I wanted something more and so I created a more robust tool I call [The EDLL Guide to Self-Assessment](#).

9. Training

While learning another language is not rocket science, it is something that as adults, most of us have never done before. Getting some training is an essential part of creating a more effective and efficient language learning journey.

Abraham Lincoln said, *“Given six hours to cut down a tree, I’d spend the first four sharpening my axe.”*

Getting some training then is a lot like sharpening the axe.

This could be done by simply subscribing to The Everyday Language Learner blog and reading along as I do my best to empower and encourage independent language learners.

Check out other great language blogs too.

There are other great programs as well. **Check out Multilingual Living's** new [Challenge 180](#).

Or you could read a book like [The Whole World Guide to Language Learning](#), [How To Be a More Successful Language Learner](#) or my book, [The Everyday Language Learners Guide to Getting Started](#) First Class Edition which is a comprehensive package of ebooks, interviews, audio lessons and worksheets designed to give you a firm foundation in independent, self-directed language learning.

Finally, if you want a more personal training experience, you could find a specialized program focusing on preparing learners for community based, independent language learning or you could consider finding a language coach.

10. Native Speaking Friends

I want to be clear here that I do not in any way see native speaking friends as a “tool” for language learning.

They are the reason for learning language, not a means to an end and I want to caution all learners to take care not to ‘use’ people to reach your goals.

One of the concerns I have with most language exchange programs is that the focus is too often on learning the language and not on building relationships.

That said, if we are serious about learning another language we need to have friendships with native speakers. They will be an important resource, will be someone with whom we can practice

regularly and will help us sustain motivation when the road gets tough.

But if we approach this with the right attitude and the right focus, all of these things will help our friendship become deeper and more intimate and lead to a lifetime of great memories.

Are There More?

Certainly there could be and there could also be fewer than I have listed above. Each person will have their own list.

You need to take a look at your situation, your learning style and personality and at the goals you have for learning the language and decide what is best for you.

Climb Past the Saddle

Resting square in the center of Colorado sits Mount Princeton a 14,197 foot mountain that is part of the Collegiate Peaks range just outside of the quiet mountain town of Buena Vista.

I spent four summers in the shadow of Mount Princeton as a whitewater rafting guide on the Arkansas River. I took groups of high school students backpacking through the forests beneath its talussed slopes. I watched countless sunsets over its north ridge from the front porch of Bongo Billy's while sipping a hot caramel-almond steamer.

And I made four attempts at its summit; *four failed attempts*. On each attempt, I was able to make it up to the saddle, the low part of the ridge found between the false summit and the real summit, but was unable to climb past it.

Mount Princeton is in no way a difficult mountain to climb. There are no technical sections. The trail is not all together steep. The approach is simple; easy even. And yet in four attempts, I never managed to reach the summit.

My adversarial relationship with Mount Princeton in many ways reflects some of the challenges that we language learners face in our attempts to summit, or master, the language we are learning.

It is fairly easy to make it to the saddle, to that intermediate level of language mastery, where we can accomplish all the daily tasks

that we need to accomplish in order to survive. We can get around, have simple conversations, order meals at the restaurant and in general live comfortable lives among native speakers. But at the saddle, the summit always looms above us as a reminder that we aren't there yet.

Climbing past the saddle is a difficult challenge for most language learners. We even have terms for getting stuck there, saying that we have “reached a plateau” or that we “have fossilized in our learning.” Like my attempts to climb Mount Princeton, there are reasons for this stagnation, some of which are valid and some that are not.

Snow Storms

My first attempt to climb Mount Princeton ended in a snowstorm. It was mid May and by the time we poked our heads out of the tent to greet the rising sun, the snow was so deep that we had no chance to make it to the top.

Life is like that isn't it? A new baby is born. A new job begun or an old job is lost. A sick family member needs daily assistance. Sometimes there are snowstorms in life that force us to retreat – for a time – from our goals. But we needn't fear – the mountain, barring a Mayan Apocalypse, isn't going anywhere. We can take the time off necessary to weather the storm and then return to climb again another day. Snow storms seem to me a valid reason to remain at the saddle.

Stuck Cars

On my second attempt to climb Mount Princeton later that same summer, my friend Chris and I had the great idea of climbing it at night. It was a full moon and we knew many friends who had enjoyed the glory of the galaxies from the summit. Our not so great idea was to drive my 1983 Ford Mustang up the fire road as high as we could to save time.

An hour into our adventure the Mustang was high centered and going nowhere. We spent the next three hours working to free it from the mountain's grip. Having spent all our energy on our own stupidity, we slept there in the road and returned to town the next morning. Sometimes our own bad choices thwart our endeavors and we must live with the reality of the consequences.

The Chalet

On my third attempt I went alone to the chalet that snuggles into the ridge just below the saddle. Its stone fireplace and panoramic east-facing windows make it a great getaway. I hiked up after supper, planning on spending a quiet night at the chalet before rising early enough the next morning to reach the summit by sunrise.

When my alarm went off at 4:30 the next morning, *I made my decision*: I'd sleep another hour or two and skip the sunrise summit party. I reset my alarm for six. This time when the alarm went off, I sat up, reached over and lit my small stove to heat water for coffee and grabbed a muffin from my bag. *I made another decision*: I'd enjoy a few hours there in the chalet as the sun rose before the world in front of me. It was warm in my

sleeping bag, I had a good book and I had coffee. I was very comfortable. By the time I finally extracted myself from the warm cocoon of comfort at the chalet, it was time to return.

And this, of course, highlights what is perhaps the most common reason that we plateau as language learners: **We get comfortable.**

I believe there is a truism in language learning that you reach where you **need** to reach in the language. If you need to be at a low intermediate level of proficiency, you will get to that level and perhaps a bit past that level. But pushing forward toward the summit requires extra effort and that effort requires more than most of us want to give.

Distractions

My fourth and final attempt to conquer Mount Princeton took place on January first. My friend Lee and I left a cabin full of good friends, with whom we had brought in the New Year, to snowshoe up to the top. It was fun and we had a great climb, but as we approached the saddle three hours later, exhausted, we began to think about all of our friends back in the valley. The thought of being to being back in the cabin, chatting with our friends, continually distracted us from our goal of summiting Mount Princeton and so we turned back.

Language learners are also prone to distraction. We pick up new hobbies. We even decide to begin learning a completely different language.

The Secret

I've climbed many mountains in Colorado and elsewhere and have discovered a simple secret for reaching the top: *Put one foot in front of the other, one step at a time and don't stop until every direction you look is down.* It's that easy.

Learning another language is similar. It's not rocket science or brain surgery or the IRS tax system. Everyone on the face of the earth does it at least once in their lifetime and it is something that most people do it two or three or more times.

If you have found yourself hanging out at the saddle for a while, with the summit looming above you, take heart. You can continue to push forward, continue to grow and expand your command of the language. You can reach the summit. It won't be easy, though, so I'd like to offer a few ideas to help you along the way.

Stay in the Game

When I asked my wife what she thought was the most important factor for continuing to move forward as an advanced speaker of a language, her advice was to “**stay in the game.**”

She demonstrated this to me again the other day when I came home to find her pouring over a grammar supplement and writing sentences with a form she hadn't quite figured out yet. This was after spending three hours drinking tea with our neighbor – three hours of conversation about every topic imaginable. Her Turkish is really good and yet she continues to *intentionally* work to fine

tune and focus on the aspects of the language that she hasn't yet mastered.

Here are three things that can help the most:

Read, Read, Read

Reading is an enjoyable way to continue to expand and grow in your mastery of the language. Read for pleasure and read a lot. Find books you've read and loved in your native language and read translated copies. Read before you go to bed. Read over your lunch break. Read and read and read.

Develop Friendships

Whether you are an expat living abroad or living in your home country, you need to develop deep and lasting relationships with native speakers of the language you are learning. Relationships take time, of course, but it is worth the effort to have a native speaker who will be there for you, who can correct your mistakes and with whom you can email, chat, call or skype with regularly.

Imagine and Do

Imagine what you would like to be able to do with the language. Maybe you'd like to be able to interpret speeches for an audience. Perhaps you'd like to be able to give a speech about a certain topic. Or maybe you'd like to write an article in a magazine. Imagine what you would like to do and then begin doing it – now.

This final point is very important. I was working with a coaching client of mine here in Istanbul who was starting her own business. She wanted to improve her Turkish so that she could continue to

grow her business in the Turkish market. When she imagined what she would need to be able to do in Turkish, she said she needed to be able to be interviewed by the media. I encouraged her to have Turkish friends come up with questions for her to answer. I encouraged her to start by writing out answers to interview questions; to give mock interviews to friends, to the mirror, to the cat, to anyone who would listen. I encouraged her to video record some mock interviews so she could watch them and see what she still needed to work on. I encouraged her to not let her first real interview be her first interview. By giving hundreds of mock interviews, she would push herself forward, preparing her for the day when the media would call.

So imagine what *you* would like to do with the language and begin doing it today.

Here are some ideas to get your imagination going:

- If you want to be able to interpret speeches, *start interpreting speeches now*. Find a speech online and practice.
- If you want to write articles for a magazine, *start writing weekly at a blog* (your own or someone else's).
- If you want to give speeches, preach sermons, address corporate boards or teach a lesson – *start doing so now*, even if only for yourself or your family.

No cowboy rides their first bull at the rodeo. They start back at the ranch on ponies and move up to bulls and one day – probably before they feel ready – they sign up for the real rodeo. Imagine

what you'd like to be able to do with the language and begin doing it today.

Need Not Want

I'd like to end by telling you that all you need in order to move forward as an upper intermediate or advance speaker of the language is *desire* - that all you need is to *want* to move forward.

However, if I am honest I have to recognize that for most of us, **that may not be enough.**

We *want* to do all sorts of things in life that we never get around to. The warm cocoon of where we are at right now is comfortable and as powerful as a sedative.

And so merely *wanting* to continue to improve for most of us is rarely enough.

As I mentioned before, in general we will always reach the level to which we **need** to reach in order to accomplish all the required tasks of our daily life.

If you were to cross-examine all the expats living in Turkey, for example, you would probably find that all of them can accomplish the daily tasks required to be able to live in Turkey.

However, I think you would find that a great many get stuck at that level. A few push forward through sheer force of will.

But in examining those whose Turkish is a superior level, of near native like fluency, I think you would find that it wasn't so much *will power* that had propelled them forward as much as it was a ***raising of the level of need.***

Many have married into a Turkish family and therefore, it's all Turkish all the time.

They have taken a job with a Turkish firm or have enrolled in a Turkish Masters program at a local university.

They have signed on to something that has raised the level to which they *need* to speak the language.

As advanced speakers we must find ways to increase the level to which we actually *need* to know the language. **You have to be creative in finding this need.**

I am going to try to do this by beginning to write a monthly newsletter about independent language learning for a Turkish website I have created to help Turks learn English.

Here are some ideas that might be helpful for you:

- Buy a cookbook in the language and commit to making a meal from it every week.
- Switch all of your technology (ipods, cell phones, etc) from your native language to the target language.
- Sign up to audit a class from a foreign university taught in the language.

- Offer to teach a class or give a seminar in the language.

The View

The view from the saddle is always nice. But the view from the summit is spectacular.

As language learners, we need to take intentional steps to avoid getting stuck in the shadow of the summit of language mastery.

It is worth the effort and will offer unparalleled views and amazing opportunities.

Get started today and don't stop.

(this post was originally a guest post I wrote for [Multilingual Living](#))

What's the Password

It's a Fairy Tale World

In all the fairy tales, the key to entering the enchanted castle or cave or gate is always a secret password. Without it, nobody gets in.

As an English speaker from America who grew up extremely monolingual, I remain locked out of most languages of the world. I am in need of a key, a password which will let me in.

You've Got to Get In

A super important factor in learning a new language is the ability to receive [comprehensible input](#).

There are a lot of tools we can use to make sure we receive the massive amounts of comprehensible input necessary to master a language quickly, but today I want to focus on the use of password phrases.

The Keys to the Castle

Like it or not, comprehensible input doesn't grow on trees. Out in the community amongst native speakers then, it is important that you be proactive in [helping them help you](#).

They just need a little guidance after all and password phrases can be the tool with which you can do this.

Password phrases are used with native speakers to access more comprehensible input.

Before You Begin

One of your first goals as a language learner should be to establish your identity as someone who is serious about learning the language with new native speakers that you meet.

Doing this in the target language will increase the likelihood that they will respond in their language. Starting in the target language is an important first step.

A few password phrases allowing you to do this are:

- “I want to learn _____(the target language).”
- “Please talk to me in _____(the target language).”
- “Will you help me practice _____(the target language).”
- “I can’t speak very well yet.”

Take Control

Password phrase allow you to take control of interactions and will help you be a better learner of the language.

A few examples of simple password phrases that will allow you to take control are:

- “Please slow down.”
- “Please say that again.”
- “Please write that for me.”
- “Please give me an example.”
- “What does it mean?”
- “How do you say this?” (in regards to an object)
- “I don’t understand.”

Set the Parameters

Background knowledge and context are important features of comprehensible input.

The more you know about the topic being discussed the more chance you have of understanding what is being said. Because of this fact, if you can direct conversations toward topics that you already know a bit about, you will receive more comprehensible input and will have a more meaningful and constructive time of conversation.

A few examples of phrases that will help you set the parameters are:

- “Can you please tell me about (insert topic)?”
- “I saw on the news last night that (insert topic) happened. Can you tell me about that?”

Getting it Recorded

I think [recording](#) and listening to the target language are amazing tools for language learners. [Grand Tour questions](#), [pronunciation practice](#), [Hand Crafted Audio](#), and [Narrow Listening](#) are all great ideas, but if you cannot communicate to a native speaker, you won't be able to capture their voice for later listening.

Here are a few examples of password phrases that will help you make recordings:

- “I am learning (target language). Can you tell me about (insert topic) and I'll record it?”
- “Please speak at a normal rate.”
- “Can you help me record some sentences?”
- “Please say this word/sentence three times.”

Make it Happen

Password phrases are an important tool for helping you have better interactions with native speakers. You of course will need to get each of them translated into the target language and you will need to carry them with you on a card or memorize them.

There are many more than the few samples above and as you interact in the target language, you will probably think of others.

You can also find a great list in Peter Pikkert's LACE Manual available [HERE](#) (page 35, Pikkert calls them Powertools).

Password phrases will help you take control of your interactions with native speakers and allow you to receive more comprehensible input.

Make your list today.

Get them translated and get started!

Find Your Style

In Minnesota where I lived for five years, canoeing is a popular sport. Minnesotans love to canoe and some even love to make their own canoes. They're called cedar strip canoes and they're beautiful; real works of art.

I know several friends who have built one and all of them were successful – none of them sank!

But each friend took a different path to build their cedar strip canoe. Their choices reflect both their learning style and their personalities.

In order to explore this idea a bit more I have created four fictional friends who all built their own cedar strip canoe.

Who do you most relate to?

1. Joe signed up for a week long cedar strip canoe class set deep in the north woods at a cabin nestled on the shore of one of Minnesota's 10,000 pristine lakes. He and ten others were walked step by step through the process of building their very own canoe. The instructor watched over them, giving correction, demonstrating techniques and stepping in at times to help them finish more difficult tasks. Joe had a great time and loved the interaction of giving and receiving feedback from his fellow builders. It was a very expensive class, but in the end Joe had a great experience, a group of new friends and a beautiful cedar strip canoe.

2. John on the other hand ordered a cedar strip canoe kit online. It came with pre cut pieces and great directions and John was able to work on it in his spare time from his garage at home. He mostly worked alone, but when he got stuck he would call a friend who had built a few of these before and together they would solve the problem. He loved the challenge of figuring out how to put the pieces together and while he had a few mishaps here and there, none were fatal – character marks as his friend put it. In the end, John spent a moderate amount of money but had an amazing sense of accomplishment and a beautiful cedar strip canoe.
3. Jake saw his first cedar strip canoe on a trip up north. He stopped the owner to ask about it and found to his amazement that it was homemade. Jake was taken by the idea and asked a lot of questions. Later he surfed the web and watched every available how video and ordered three books from Amazon on the topic. From his own research he compiled a list of materials he would need to purchase and began hunting them up. He found a great deal on cedar strips from a a canoe company going out of business, but none of it was pre-cut. Armed with a can do attitude and the resources he had found, Jake spent nearly every evening for two months working at constructing his canoe and in the end, at very little cost, he had built himself a beautiful cedar strip canoe.
4. And finally, there was Jim. Jim was first struck with the idea to build a cedar strip canoe when he saw one pass him on top of another car as he was driving north to visit his parents. He sped up to get a better look at it and began making plans in his

head to build one. He spent hours running his hands over other cedar strip canoes, studying the lines and the way they were put together. He found a friend with two large seasoned cedar logs in a shed and another friend willing to trade labor for the use of his sawmill. He drew countless plans, and began at once to fiddle around with smaller pieces of cedar, experimenting with the different ways to bend them and stick them together. He made mistake after mistake, but each time he learned something new and improved on his overall understanding of the boat building process. In the end, he didn't even build a canoe. He built – at virtually no cost to himself – a beautiful cedar strip kayak.

Find Your Style

I hope you get the gist of the story as it relates to language learning. When thinking about how you will learn the language, you need to make the best choices for you.

If you are not a self starter, have a hard time with ambiguity but love to learn in the interactive setting of a classroom, a class may be just the thing for you.

It may not be a popular idea on all the language blogs that are out there, but those people aren't you.

The goal is to learn another language. You will achieve this goal best when you are working at it in ways that support and reflect your personality and preferred learning style.

It is wise to research and explore the many varied methods out there for learning another language, but in the end you have to make the best choice for you.

It's your journey.

Creating a Personal Language Learning Culture

When the Chicago Bulls ran off three championships in a row back in the day, I remember hearing the story of Michael Jordan punching Steve Kerr during a Chicago Bull's practice because Mike thought Steve wasn't working hard enough.

I doubt work ethic was ever an issue again.

Players didn't show up late. Players rarely dragged through drills. If you did – you got punched in the face. Michael Jordan created a culture and that culture was winning.

Everywhere we go there is a culture at work.

Corporations have a culture. Some foster creativity, innovation and growth. Other's stifle.

Individual families have a culture. Some families thrive in a loving sense of security.

Others are shrouded in fear.

But where the culture of a nation and language is immense and unchangeable created over hundreds and hundreds of years, these micro cultures respond and fluctuate to the leadership given to them.

The Pre-Jordan Bulls won all of one division title and never won a championship in nearly twenty years. But the team culture changed.

We all have the friend who was chronically overweight until one day he or she began to run. Now they run marathons regularly. They are slim and healthy. Their fridge is filled with fruits and vegetables.

They have changed their personal culture.

How about your culture?

What habits are you working to put in place to get you where you want to be? With what are you surrounding yourself? What are you reading and listening to? Where are you going to eat out?

If you desire to learn Russian – listen to Russian music. If you want to learn French – get a French cookbook and make fantastic French food. If it's Chinese you are learning – find all the best Chinese movies.

Books and movies and food are all great ways to begin to create a personal culture of language learning. But we can go further and also begin to surround ourselves with like minded language learners.

And we need to find native speakers of the language with whom we can build relationship. These are some of the steps we must take if we desire to see ourselves as learners.

I am not asking you to consider going native.

But I do want to suggest that you take steps – one step at a time to create a personal culture that supports and empowers your desire to learn another language.

Here is a practical suggestion. Make a list of ten things you could do over the next five to ten weeks (NOT all at once!) to help create a culture of language learning.

There are literally hundreds of things you can do, but here are five that I can think of if I were wanting to learn Croatian for example:

1. Buy or check out from the library a book about Croatia.
2. Find a Croatian cook book and begin experimenting (\$10 at Amazon).
3. Buy a Croatian/English dictionary.
4. Look up a few [Croatian movies](#).
5. Google Search: “Croatian in [insert my state/my city]” See what you find. Go from there.

These are just a few ideas.

Destiny + Experience = Powerful Language Learning

I have recently been thinking about the challenge of learning a language while in your home country.

I can remember back to my time spent learning both German and Spanish while living in the states.

It was often really tough.

I have now had the privilege of living in Turkey while learning Turkish and I guess I have found that while living in the host country will not guarantee that you learn the language well, it does offer some real advantages over learning the language in your home country.

I came across two statements in a book I have been reading that sparked this thought.

The quotes speak to the main reason why learning a language while living in your home country is so often more challenging than learning in an immersion environment.

But these two ideas also give me a lot of hope for the millions of everyday language learners who want to learn another language, but are not able to spend significant amounts of time traveling to or living in another country.

As I have worked with language learners and followed others through their blogs, I have seen a pattern emerge that resonates with my own experience. The pattern is this:

Destiny + Experience = Powerful Language Learning

The life that is most powerfully lived is the one that finds passionate urgency fueled by a sense of destiny.

In my own experience, this was the main reason why my year of German in university was futile. I was perhaps the least dedicated student in the history of the professor's tenure.

I had no dream of visiting Germany. I knew no German speakers and I wasn't a philosophy major interested in reading Nietzsche, Kant or Marx in their native tongue.

In regards to my knowing German, I had absolutely no sense of destiny. There was no purpose.

Three months after completing my long year of German and graduating from university however, I decided to move to Tijuana, Mexico to work with the urban poor.

I began in earnest to study Spanish on my own. I checked out books from the library, bought dictionaries and the 501 Spanish Verbs book, made lists and flash cards and proceeded to learn more Spanish in one month than I'd learned of German in an entire year.

I had stumbled into a *passionate urgency fueled by a sense of destiny*.

I was moving to Mexico!

I need to tell you that you don't need to move across the ocean to find the purpose that will fuel a passionate urgency to learn the language.

But you do need to find the purpose, the destiny that awaits you in learning it. I want to encourage you to take some time to think about the purpose learning the language will serve in your life.

- How will it positively affect your life?
- How will it positively affect the lives of those you love?
- How will it positively affect the community?

In answering these questions, you should be able to come up with a reason and a purpose to learn the language. You don't need a giant sized purpose either – you just need one. Otherwise your motivation to learn will quickly wain and you will quit working at it.

It's that simple and it's true.

*We need to have a dream we are pursuing
and at the same time experience enough of
that dream to keep us inspired.*

When Langston Hughes penned the poem [*A Dream Deferred*](#), he was of course writing about issues far larger than my desire to learn another language.

The principle though is the same. Bad things happen when we do not experience enough of the dream to keep us inspired.

As a language learner, I saw this happen with my Spanish. After nine months living in Mexico, my Spanish was okay.

It was not nearly as good as I wanted it to be though. I returned to the states determined to keep working at it.

And for about two months, I worked at it.

But then life moved in and I moved on. My desire to improve my Spanish was always there, but without a means to use it, my Spanish quickly went the way of “out of sight, out of mind.”

Over the next ten years, I would occasionally reconnect and return to my Spanish journey.

When I was experiencing the dream, i.e. using my Spanish with Spanish speakers, I was far more intentional and consistent in my progress.

Finding ways to use the language you are learning, to experience the dream you have of mastering the language, is an inescapable necessity if you are to succeed.

Thankfully, in today’s world, this is easier than ever before. Here are a few ideas for how to experience more of the dream:

- Make a friend with a native speaker in your community.

- Join a club or association. Here are two examples: [The French Table](#) in Omaha, Nebraska; [The Chinese Association](#) in Wichita, Kansas.
- Visit [Meetup.com](#) and search for language meet-ups near you.
- Use [The Mixxer](#) to find a language exchange partner you can talk with over Skype.

I think we can all agree that both of these – destiny and experience – will be a bit easier to find or create in an immersion experience.

But it is also easier than ever before to create and find them so that you can have a powerful language learning experience while living at home.

If you are serious about language learning then you must work to identify the destiny it plays in your life and find ways to experience the dream.

If you can do both of these, you will be well on your way to success.

**The quotes above come from a book called [Soul Cravings](#) by [Erwin McManus](#).*

Fartlek Language Learning

If you are a runner, you've probably heard of the [fartlek](#). If you ran cross country in high school, you certainly have.

A fartlek is basically an easy jog with a group of other runners. The group runs in single file at a nice easy pace.

The fartlek comes in when the runner in the back sprints forward past the line to take the lead. Upon taking the lead, the next runner in the back takes a deep breath and begins his or her sprint to the front to replace the new leader.

In this leapfrog manner, runners get a good hard sprint every few minutes as they retake the lead, slowly move back in the line until they are in the rear and then, must sprint again.

For those of you who are learning another language, but who aren't necessarily in a time crunch to do so, the fartlek can be a good way to think about the language learning journey.

Some of us have the time, energy, passion and motivation to really dive into the language in one strong push over the course of three to six months and move quickly to fluency.

But for the rest of us – we everyday language learners – life doesn't easily afford those opportunities. We have the full time job, a great marriage, amazing kids, commitments in our communities and learning another language isn't exactly our main passion in life.

Life is pretty busy and thinking about learning another language on top of it all seems a fairly large hill to climb.

And this is where the fartlek comes in. The fartlek is for the most part an easy jog. The jogging part is not too taxing but is a part of building and maintaining endurance.

The sprint on the other hand leaves runners winded, their hearts racing and it is from these sprints that real gains in endurance are made.

As language learners we need to always be jogging.

We need to be doing the easy things in the language we are learning that will keep us engaged, help us maintain what we know and solidify what we have recently learned.

If we were learning Spanish for example, jogging might be:

- Having a favorite Spanish musician always in the cd player of our car.
- Visiting the Spanish grocery store once a week to buy your food.
- Twenty minutes daily of [Live Mocha](#), [Learning with Texts](#), [LingQ](#) or [Lang-8](#).
- Watching the Spanish world news round up online every evening.
- Finding a native speaking friend with whom you can chat or Skype online once a week.

- Reading a translated young adult novel like [Harry Potter](#) or [Narnia](#).
- Watching your favorite Spanish dubbed movies.
- Running through daily reviews of flashcards.

This jogging portion of your language learning journey should be fun and convenient and fit into the daily rhythm of your and your family's life.

You're not pushing to learn a lot of new words or grammar, but if you do this consistently, your Spanish will stay where it's at and even progress, albeit slowly.

Every so often then you will want to fartlek. How often will depend on [your situation](#) of course but whether it is once a month or twice a year, you want to create an opportunity to press in and master a lot of new material in one concentrated sprint of effort.

Find what works for you. One weekend a month. One week every two months. One month a year.

And it could look like a lot of different things:

- A one week class at a local community college.
- A weekend of working to master the next grammar form you need to learn.
- A two week trip to Mexico.
- A [thousand word challenge](#).

- A three week stint with a tutor.

Anything will work but there is one important thing to remember.

You absolutely must create systems of integrated review so that you do not lose what you have gained.

After the sprint, you want to fall back into the nice, easy jog. You don't want to go throw yourself on the couch, abandoning the Spanish that you have just worked so hard to master.

Find ways to get what you have just mastered in front of your eyes and in your ears every day.

[Handcrafted audio](#), [regular reading](#), and a simple flashcard system are all ways to ensure that you integrate review back into the daily rhythms of your life.

As a father and husband trying to squeeze language learning in with everything else that life has to offer, approaching the language learning journey in this manner has been both helpful and hopeful.

My desire is to see you succeed in reaching your language learning goals. I hope that this is one idea that will do just that.

10 Ways to Maximize Your Language School Experience

Language Schools. Perhaps you've been to one. Hopefully you have been to a good one, had an amazing teacher and an amazing experience and come away with a foot up on the language you've worked to master. For many of you, a language school is the only option you've ever thought of as you moved overseas and began your life as an expat in a new land with a new language.

If you are new here at The Everyday Language Learner, I want to let you know that the only real option that leads to mastery of a language is **YOU** – you taking control of your language learning and making sure you are getting what you need to learn it. And of course that could mean going to a language school. But it might not.

While language school is not for everyone or for every learning style, if you find yourself enrolled in the school's level 1 course after taking a placement test in some front office over a cup of tea, there is something you need to know.

This language class might be a good one. It might be great. **And it could quite possibly really stink.**

But none of that matters.

None of that matters if you chose right now to take charge. Remember, the language school is not responsible for your language learning – YOU ARE. And to help you take charge and rock your next class, here are ten ways you can maximize and enhance any language course – no matter how good or bad it is.

1 – Take Control

The first and most important step to maximizing the language school experience is to take charge of your learning. You are ultimately responsible and need to make the choices that will best help you learn. You're paying money to be there so make sure and get what you want and need to get out the experience. Don't be a jerk. Don't disrespect your teacher. But do what you need to do. You are not there to be a passive observer. You need to actively engage and actively work to create engagement – with your teacher, with the other students and most importantly with the language. Active engagement with the language is always better than passive engagement.

2 – Let the Teacher Know Your Objectives

Before you can let the teacher know what your objectives are, you need to know them yourself. It's part of taking control. But it is important that you let the instructor know what you are hoping to get out of the class. Again, don't be disrespectful but do let them know. Most are following a set curriculum – the same one they've followed for the last ten classes. Injecting your desires into that stream won't change their world, but I imagine most will work to add a little here or there to help you meet your objectives. Teachers love to have students show excitement and initiative and you will get a little more out of the class because of it.

3 – Get Started Before Hand

On the day you sign up for the class, get as much information about what is going to happen as you can. Try and meet with the teacher. What is her style? What does he like to focus on? Who are the other students going to be?

Pick up the syllabus or textbooks. Page through the first five chapters and make 50 -100 flashcards of the high frequency words that you do not yet know. Do this before you begin spending four hours a day in the classroom.

Getting started before hand will allow your mind to take in more because it will be taking in less. Less new material that is. You will already have laid a foundation and the time in class will be that much more effective, efficient and of course – more fun.

4 – Know Your Learning Style And Play To It

It is important to know your learning style. If you haven't read my post on learning styles take a moment to [go back and read it now](#). If you are trying to force yourself to learn in ways that grate against how you really like to learn, you will not thrive. Granted, there are no perfect situations, but knowing how you learn will help you take control of the time in the classroom. If you are a social learner then look for the other social learners. If you like to learn in a more academic, analytical way, find the other learners who also learn this way and avoid those who learn best by just talking . . . and talking . . . and talking.

5 – Don't Do Everything

Don't do everything the teacher asks you to do. Some of it will inevitably just be busy work that may or may not be helpful. If you find something not helpful and have a better way to learn the same stuff – do what works for you. Maybe you are asked to do a worksheet where you fill in the correct word. Would it be more helpful for you to take the time to decipher each sentence, look every word up, find the correct answer and complete the worksheet? Or could you maybe ask a native speaking friend to

tell you the answers? Or maybe just not do that worksheet and do something else instead? You teacher won't shoot you.

6 – Take It To The Street

One of the problems I see so many of my coaching clients in language schools struggle with is the amount of time they spend doing homework. I suggest taking that homework to the streets, to coffee shops or the neighbors and asking them to help you do the work – to tell you the answers and talk about what you are learning. In this way you cover the content again, you interact with the content at a deeper level and you get to build a real relationship with a real human being rather than with your dictionary and textbook. And your homework will get done a lot faster too.

Use this time as well to talk about what you are learning, to hear more examples of the structures and forms and to practice using what you are learning and in the end take everything deeper. And make sure to drink lots of tea too.

7 – Make It Real

One of the problems with language school is that textbooks are used which offer sterile examples of the language. We end up studying and writing sentences like:

- The man went to the store.
- The woman rode the bike to the beach.
- The boy gave the ice cream to the girl.

Unfortunately, we don't know the man, the woman or the boy. They are not real and we could care less. And we rarely pay attention to things we care less about. So anytime you are asked to do something that uses these factory created sentences, skip

them (but not the grammar) and make your own sentences using You and the people important to you as the main characters and the real happenings of your day to day life as the content.

So when the workbook asks you to translate ten sentences, look at the grammar and what they are wanting you to learn and then make up your own ten sentences about your life. Emotional connection and context or background knowledge are powerful factors in our ability to retain what we learn. Writing about things we know and people we care about will do far more to help us remember than writing about “the man who went to the store.”

8 – Flashcards

Okay this one is an old standby but I put it on the list because it highlights one of the major problems that most language schools face. They are run on a schedule with a first and a last day of class. The course has to cover a set amount of content within that time frame. And the number one complaint I hear from language learners everywhere is that the pace of the class is just too fast. They are forgetting much of what they learned in week one by the time they get to week three. It’s a race to the finish and too much content falls to the wayside.

Flashcards are your first defense against this. By consistently creating flashcards, either old fashioned notecards or with great computer based programs like Anki, you now can collect all the words and expressions you are learning and bring them with you along for the ride. Be creative in how you make these flashcards and make them as active as you can. You can read more about creating better flashcards in my [Why You Need to Get Active to Get Learning](#) post.

Extra Reading: [*Language Learning Tip: Use Paper Flashcards Effectively*](#)

9 – Journal Daily

If flashcard bring some of the words and expressions along for the ride, writing a daily journal will bring everything along. I wrote about this idea in my [guest post](#) at Fluent in 3 Months a few weeks ago, but **I think that this is the single most important activity you can pursue to truly maximize your language school experience.**

It is really a pretty simple activity. Start small and start with what you know, but write about your daily life using the new words expressions and grammar forms you are learning. It will be all simple sentences at first (if you're in level 1) but you will soon have created a growing collection of written journal entries that are interesting, emotionally connected and filled with context and background knowledge – all important elements to high quality [comprehensible input](#).

As you write them, you will also want to get them corrected so that all the spelling and grammar and expressions are right. I would do this when you “take it to the street” or you could stay after class to go over them with your teacher. Just find someone to read through them and interact with you as you get them corrected. Now you have created a nice library of written material that you can go back and read any time to review everything you have learned.

10 – Record Your Journals

The next and perhaps most important step is to record a native speaker reading your journals. This allows you to create a short

30 – 60 second audio recording that you can listen to on the bus, as you wash dishes or any time you have a few moments. This allows you to seamlessly integrate review into your daily life. If you do this regularly you will soon build an even more amazing personal library of recorded material that will include every thing you have learned in class.

This is maximized language learning.

There is not perfect language school or learning program. Any course or program can be improved though when you take control and work to maximize the opportunities that you do have. My hope is that in sharing these ten ideas, you will be empowered to create a better experience for yourself as you take a class or course.

I want to be up front and say that I have not personally used language schools in my learning of Turkish. I took a brief course in Mexico when I was working on my Spanish, but outside of that, most of what I know comes from conversations with friends and language coaching clients who have used classes. And so because of that, I would really like to hear from you as well.

Personal Study Time

Time spent studying the language on your own.

These are activities that will take you into deeper learning as you work in solitude, at home, on your morning commute, out on a run or in any environment where you work alone.

[Click here to leave your review of *Activities and Strategies for Everyday Language Learners* on Amazon.](#)

Putting in the Time

I recently began reading [Malcolm Gladwell's](#) book [Outliers](#).

So far it has been a great book. So far being the first two chapters. In chapter two though he discusses the 10,000 hour rule.

Research into those who are at the top of their selected fields, the best of the best, were not found to be somehow more naturally gifted than everyone else.

The findings showed rather that they had just put in more time practicing. And 10,000 hours seems to be the magic number.

So in his example from the violin academy, the difference between those destined to stardom and those who were just good came down to the amount of time they had put into practicing the violin.

There were no examples of stars who had not put in the time and none that had put in the time but didn't become stars.

One thing and one thing only seemed to mark the best of the best – they put in more time. And it carried across all professions. And Gladwell did the math – that's 20 hours a week for ten years!

As a language learner then I look at this and would identify the best of the best as those who can interpret the language both ways effortlessly and could write professionally in the second language.

The guys and gals at the United Nations who simultaneously interpret speeches about a super wide assortment of topics for example.

Did they put in 10,000 hours in the second language?

Is the difference between those hired at the UN and those passed over as “not up to the task” just a difference in the hours put into language learning?

Language could be different – it seems more highly nuanced and complicated and broad – while on the other hand it is also innate.

Playing an instrument is not something every person on earth does by the time they are five years old.

Quality of input also has to play a large role in how well we do.

In my observations though, putting in the time is one of the distinguishing points between those who have and are doing well at learning another language and those who are struggling to progress.

In looking at my own journey with languages, I put in the required hour of class three days a week studying German at university and little more.

Spanish followed and as I was planning a move to Mexico, my Spanish grew and quickly surpassed my German and at the end a semester of studying completely on my own, my Spanish was light years ahead of my now forgotten German.

But motivated by an upcoming move, I put in perhaps four or five times as many hours in Spanish on my own as I did in my German class. My Spanish continued to slowly improve, but it was in fits and busts as I kept coming back to it over the next ten years.

And then I moved to Turkey.

My Turkish surpassed my command of Spanish in about six months. Again, at twenty to twenty five dedicated hours of Turkish study per week, the amount of hours I had put into Spanish and into Turkish was probably similar.

The density of the hours was different, but the total amount I bet was pretty similar.

But what is the caveat for the everyday language learner who just really wants to be able to function at a high level in the language?

I think there are a few things that I take away from the 10,000 hour rule.

1. Consistency will grow your hours far faster than the binge method of hitting it hard every once in a while. People get to the 10,000 hour mark by creating a personal culture/ethic of putting in the time everyday.
2. I will grant that some of us have a sort of “gift” in language learning. I have seen it in my own kids. But I think it is probably used more than anything else as an excuse for those of us who have not done as well. Some may have a

gift, but none of us are somehow handicapped so that we can't learn language.

3. Success breeds success. A little early success will do much to create the culture that will allow you to put in the time. This is one of the foundational principles I have tried to work into the [Ten Week Journey](#) to help beginning and struggling intermediate learners find success as language learners.
4. The only magic bullet for language learners is time. You have to put the time in. Some methods are better than others. Some programs are more effective or efficient. Motivation and commitment are important. But no matter what, you have to put in the time.

Multi Entry Language Learning

Multi Entry.

As a language learner and a language coach, I have tried a lot of different methods and strategies to help improve effectiveness and efficiency in learning. Multi Entry is one thing I have found that really can maximize what I do with my language learning.

Multi Entry is when you enter the language from multiple directions and it is a great way to think about your learning – on lots of levels.

Multi entry will help maximize your language learning and increase both the rate and the depth to which you learn.

You see it happening in a lot of the online program that are out there, but as a self directed language learner, I want to encourage you to think about how you can incorporate multi entry into your personal program of learning.

And if you're a teacher, to implement multi entry in your classroom.

So what does multi entry look like?

First you should think about entering the language with all four language modalities:

Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking.

A little bit of each everyday.

Second, you should think about entering into each new aspect of language you are learning from different directions, with different activities and different methods.

If you're taking a class or working through a textbook, how can you rehash all the same things outside of the class or book from a different angle?

Can you journal and use it all again?

Can you Skype with a language partner and start by saying, "Can I tell you about what I learned today?"

How about a podcast or an audio book?

Think about how you can cover the same information from multiple directions, with multiple sources.

Finally, multi entry is important because it allows your brain to make more connections, from more directions with the new information.

More connections. Deeper connections.

Multi entry – put it into practice today for maximized language learning.

Label Up

It is an age old idea. You embark on learning a new language and so one of the first things you do is label all sorts of things all over your house.

You make use of that sticky-note pad you have in the drawer on which to write the words for door, light switch, window, wall, floor, drawer, mirror, etc, etc.

You then peel it off and stick it to those same objects.

You may even try to label the cat, but pretty soon your house and its contents are covered with sticky notes on which hundreds of new words are written.

And this is a good thing to do.

But can this simple activity be maximized and expanded and made somehow a bit more interactive and effective?

Yes it can.

When I learned how to learn language, this was one of the first ideas I was taught. By expanding this simple act to include the activities associated with each item, you can create a more interactive and expanded learning experience.

So instead of just writing “DOOR” on the sticky note, also include a second sticky-note right below the first that has a few sentences in the target language that say what you do with or to the door.

Sticky-note 1: DOOR

Sticky-note 2: I open the door. I close the door. I knock the door.

Sticky-note 1: MIRROR

Sticky-note 2: I look in the mirror. I see my reflection in the mirror. I clean the mirror.

By expanding this activity you create a broader more robust learning environment and add some real life to it.

Too often we learn things in seclusion and out of context. But the door doesn't just exist there in space and time. It has purpose. It is a part of our life and we must act upon it.

So why just learn what it is called when you can also begin to explore all the ways you interact with it.

And that is why it is a good idea to add a third sticky-note below the first two – an empty one! This will encourage you to think of other ways we interact with the objects. **Because sometimes we slam doors.**

By labeling in this manner, you will also more quickly and easily enlist the help of any native speakers who come into your home. (especially important for expats) If the door just says "DOOR" your neighbors will think, "Neat, she is learning the word for 'door.'"

Once we add a sentence or two below it though, a natural invitation is given to expand the list and to learn more about the object.

This is one reason not to worry too much about grammar. A few mistakes will ensure your friends interaction with the idea and lead to more interaction around the particular item. Just as most of you naturally noticed and perhaps scoffed at my grammatical mistake above.

“I knock *on* the door.”

VIDEO

Flashcards

These past few months I have been working to learn the [2000 most common Turkish words](#). I found a list and set a personal goal to learn all of them by January 1st of 2012 – last week!

After a quick pass through the A words back in early November, I discovered that I knew about 70% of the words and so needed only to focus on the remaining 30% – many of which I was familiar with but not confident in.

My plan was to use a computer based flashcard program called Anki and a number of other ideas to make sure that I learned all 2,000 words backwards and forwards.

Now before going any further I need you to know that I failed at both my goal to learn these 2,000 words as well as my desire to use [Anki](#) to learn them. But I learned a whole lot in the process and I want to share that with you today.

My Failures

I failed to learn the words because I didn't put in the time – it was November and December after all, months that are notoriously busy. And December is a month that I have never been able to be productive in. I am not sure what it is, but I tend to run low on motivation and will power as each year draws to a close. These are things I should have known. And so I worked very little on the goal I had set.

I also failed to use Anki effectively. I say failed because I did not continue to use it as I said I would. In reality, I quit using Anki of my own accord because I didn't like it. Anki is a fantastic program that is downloaded to your computer and I plan on having an Anki lover write a guest post about it in the future. I learned a lot from Anki and if it suits you, it is a great learning tool. But I didn't like using it on my computer. I guess I am old fashioned, but I found I liked using good ole fashioned paper flashcards a lot better – and so that is what I did.

Old Fashioned Flashcards

Because of what I learned using Anki though, I am now using old fashioned flashcards in a much more effective and efficient manner. Anki uses an idea called [spaced repetition](#). By choosing how well you know a term, the program determines when you will review it next. Words you know well might only come up once a week or less. Words you have yet to learn will come up daily. This creates a much more efficient review session as little time is wasted shuffling through cards that you already know.

I am not sure why I never thought about it before, but this can easily be done with paper flashcards as well. I used to have these growing stacks of flashcards, inches thick and filled with every word I had ever written down. It would take copious amounts of time to get through the whole stack and was intimidating to even look at. More often than not, all I did was look at that stack.

Borrowing the spaced repetition method from Anki, I now have four stacks of cards. These have allowed me to more efficiently

and effectively review vocabulary using paper flashcards and I find myself reviewing a lot more often because I have removed the burden that a pile of cards six inches thick creates on my delicate mind. Here is how it works.

Pile One

Pile one is filled with the words that are new or still relatively unknown.

This pile should be no more than about 50 cards so that you can review its contents in one to two minutes. If it's more than that, you probably won't take the time to review and it will be too bulky to keep in your pocket.

Because the review is now manageable, I find myself reviewing this stack a whole lot more – sometimes four or five times a day. More consistent contact with these new words helps move them more quickly into my working vocabulary.

As soon as a word from pile one becomes known – meaning I rarely have to think about its meaning any more – it gets moved to pile two.

Before we move on to pile two however, I want to mention that I also keep ten or so blank cards at the bottom of pile one. This way when I come across a new word while I am reading or listening to something, I can make sure and capture it and begin to learn it as well.

Pile Two

Pile two is filled with all the words that you now know. You have given each of these a fair amount of review, but they probably are not locked into your long term memory yet. With regular repetition though, they will soon be.

I keep pile two on my desk and review these cards once or twice a week. They take a bit longer to get through as there will be more than in pile one but if you can keep them somewhere in the house where you spend a bit of time – at your desk, on the end table or perhaps beside the toilet – you can revisit them once a week in order to continue to drive them deep into your memory.

The key is to keep this pile fluid – words you realize you’ve forgotten go back to pile one while words that you feel are really locked in go to pile three.

Pile Three

Pile three is for words that are locked in. You have reviewed them and know them well. You know their meaning at first glance without a moments hesitation and are using them in speech and recognizing them right away in your reading or listening.

But to make sure you don’t loose any of these you will want to review pile three once a month or so. This ensures that they don’t get lost, that you don’t come across them a year from now with that, “I know I learned this word once” feeling.

Again, pile three should be fluid and some words will inevitably find their way back to pile two.

Finally, when you realize that a word is super locked in and a part of your working vocabulary – for good – then feel free to move it to pile four.

Pile Four

I'll let you in on a little secret. There is no pile four. There is a trash can however and I would encourage you to put these cards in it. Littering is bad.

Other Ideas

Using flashcards in this manner will go a long way toward helping you more quickly incorporate new words into your working vocabulary.

There is more that you can do to effectively use paper flashcards and quickly grow your vocabulary though. By doing these you will maximize their use and discover even more success with learning new words.

The first and perhaps most important is to give yourself massive amounts of input so that you increase your chances of hearing or seeing these new words in other places.

Flashcards by themselves are devoid of context and emotion – two important elements that stimulate learning. By giving yourself massive amounts of input you will hear more of these new words more often in contexts that are rich in meaning and filled with emotion and this will greatly increase the speed and depth of your learning. So make sure you are:

- Having regular conversations with native speakers
- Reading daily in the target language
- Watching lots of fun movies or a TV series in the language
- Listening to podcasts or the radio in the language

And a few other ideas for improving the use of flashcards are:

- Review flashcards with a native speaker to determine if a word is worth learning or not. When doing this I found that many of the words I was working so hard to learn were actually outdated words or technical terms – words I would rarely use and had never seen. I threw them away!
- Use pictures for objects rather than writing the translation.
- Occasionally review the cards backwards – looking at your description/definition first and trying to say the target language word.
- Regularly shuffle the deck so that the order is not the same every time.
- Write the definition in light pencil so that you cannot see it through the paper.
- Use flashcards for social expressions, idioms and proverbs.

I am looking forward to continue to use flashcards in an effective and efficient manner over the coming year. I hope you too will try

some of these ideas and see how they work for you. Remember, experiment and find what works for you!

Extensive and Repeated Listening

I recently re-read an article written for an academic journal that brought to light some interesting thoughts about different types of listening activities and their comparative effectiveness for language learners.

The article, [*Extensive or Repeated Listening? A comparison of their effects on the use of listening strategies*](#) investigates students' use of listening strategies when engaged in both extensive and repeated listening.

It is an interesting article as are the findings but is a bit academic and so I won't get into the details here. There are some great takeaways though for the everyday language learner and hopefully a few new ideas to try out as part of your personal language learning program.

Extensive and Repeated Listening

Extensive listening is when a learner listens to several different recordings on the same topic. In this study, students listened to five different audio recordings one time each.

Repeated listening is when a learner listens to the same recording repeatedly. In the study, students listened to the same recording five times. **The researchers in the study found that:**

The results of this study showed that the participants used significantly more listening strategies, including metacognitive

and cognitive listening strategies, while engaging in repeated listening than in extensive listening. They also used significantly more types of listening strategies in repeated listening than in extensive listening.

Okay, I'll admit I am not entirely certain what all those terms mean even though I've nearly completed my Masters in ESL. My purpose in sharing the article today is not however to compare these two ideas or look at the data but rather to introduce them. Using the article lends weight to the concepts – they are activities widely discussed in academia in regards to language learning.

They are also activities that I believe should be a part of everyone's personal language learning plan of attack no matter what your level or situation.

I have written about each before and will continue to encourage people to use both extensive listening and repeated listening in the future. They are both forms of narrow listening and can both be applied to reading as well which makes them an all around activity that you can use any where and any time.

How To Get Started

Again, extensive listening is when you listen to several recordings about the same topic (listening to four different podcasts all about Man United for example) and repeated listening is when you listen to one recording over and over again (listening to one podcast about Man United five times in a row).

In order to take advantage of these great learning activities, you'll need to take some time to find good listening materials. Great

resources can be found with a little bit of hard work and a hackers mentality.

Tools

In order to best utilize both extensive and repeated listening, a few tools of the trade are necessary.

1. [Ipod](#) or MP3 player for storing your audio files and taking them with you.
2. Google Translate for finding listening materials. (**Read more:** [Discovering a New Language from Afar](#))
3. [Audio Hijack](#) for recording any audio from the Internet that isn't downloadable.
4. Time to search, collect, and listen.

How To: Extensive Listening

For repeated listening of course you just need to find one audio recording of a topic in which you're interested. Extensive listening will require a bit more work.

- Before you begin searching yourself, it may be helpful to stop by any of the forums where language learners hang out and ask if others have found sites dedicated to creating these kinds of extensive listening materials. This could save you a lot of time.

- A few great examples of extensive listening sites I have found are: [Culture Talk](#) and [Culture Interviews with Turkish Speaking Professionals](#).

If you can't find a site dedicated to creating extensive listening resources, I'd first like to encourage you to consider making your own. It would be a great service to language learners everywhere.

- The easiest way to find extensive listening audio is to be found in the news. Most languages will have world news broadcasts and most will cover the same news topics. So for example, here in Turkey, not only do we have all of the Turkish news stations but we also have BBC Turkish as well as CNN Turkish.
- Another way to find extensive listening material is to use Google Translate to search for audio of a topic you are interested in. Find the translation of the topic and then search for that term in iTunes, Youtube and other media sites. You may have to try searching for a number of different nuances of the terms but should lead to at least some listening resources.
- Once you have found listening resources, you can download them if possible or use Audio Hijack to record them for your personal use. With the free version of Audio Hijack you can record up to ten minutes of audio.
- Finally, you will want to collect all of the audio recordings into topical files so that you find them easily and can listen to the various recordings one after another. Put these files on your ipod and you are ready to go.

Personal Experience

My own experience with extensive listening comes in the form of the [Grand Tour Question](#) and the audio is audio that I made myself. This can be a great way to get extensive listening audio and it is especially good because it got me out into the community talking with native Turkish speakers (this of course is more difficult to do living in your home country). What I did was ask the same questions to several friends and record their answers. By asking a question about a common cultural or historical topic, I was ensured a great amount of repeat material in the responses. So for example, I asked the question:

What are your memories of the 1999 earthquake?

Every response was of course from a different perspective but much in the way of themes, vocabulary and expressions were the same and all were using the same grammatical tense in their answers. This created a rich listening experience.

How To: Repeated Listening

Repeated listening is much easier to prepare. All you need is an interesting audio recording. Try to find recordings about topic that you are familiar with and that you are passionate about. This will make the repeated listening nature of the activity more interesting.

You can listen in a lot of different ways I suppose. You could listen four or five times right in a row. You could listen three times a day for three days. You could listen once a day, everyday for a week.

The repetition creates a listening experience in which each pass through the material becomes more familiar than the last.

Most experts suggest that you listen to the files until they become unbearable. Then move on to something new.

Personal Experience

About two years ago I picked up a dubbed copy of the movie *We Are Marshall*. It is a movie about a college American football team and was one I had wanted to watch for a long time. For one week I set aside two hours each day and watched it in Turkish.

My first time through the movie, I spent a lot of time trying to keep up, trying to pick out the main points of conversations and trying figure out new words and expressions I was hearing. It was a bit discouraging. I kept at it though and was surprised to feel like I was understanding more the next day. Each day was the same and by the fifth day, I was understandably a bit tired of the movie, but was understanding far more than I had the first day – noticeably more.

Now It's Your Turn

Listening is an important piece to a robust personal language learning program and as an independent language learner, it is important to take advantage of any and all activities you can.

Extensive and repeated listening are both great activities that will help you focus in on increasing your listening comprehension as

well as provide greater amounts of [comprehensible input](#) which will help you learn the language more effectively.

VIDEO

The Topic Tour

An important element of language learning is comprehensible input – and lots of it!

But comprehensible input doesn't grow on trees.

In fact, the world can be a pretty tough place for a language learner. Finding good sources of comprehensible input can be a bit like trying to find water in the Sahara Desert.

And so if you can't find it, you might as well go about creating it yourself.

A great form of comprehensible input comes in the form of narrow listening.

Stephen Krashen talks of both narrow reading and narrow listening and their importance, but today I want to talk a bit about the listening part of the equation.

Narrow listening is when you create or find multiple audio files on the same topic. It is as the name implies: the goal is to have a narrow focus in your listening.

Here is an example of how narrow listening might work in the form of a topic tour:

The idea is to find a topic your interested in and then listen to a lot of different recordings about that topic.

Today this is easier than ever. Google translate can help you dial into the correct search phrases and the internet offers amazing opportunities to find listening material.

These could be podcasts, movies, radio programs, audio books and could of course include recordings that you make with native speakers.

I recently listened to a great podcast in which a group of university aged Turks shared their thoughts on what is going on in Libya. I had earlier in the day watched a BBC Turkish broadcast online about the same topic.

By narrowing in on a single topic, I was able to give myself more comprehensible input and a better chance to learn.

And I guess I believe that with each pass the content makes over your brain, the deeper the connections to the language go.

Use Music to Learn Another Language

What?

I can listen to music to learn languages?

Is this a joke?

No, I am totally serious. You do have to learn grammar eventually but music is absolutely key in learning languages.

I speak seven languages and listening to lyrical music in these languages was fundamental to my being able to copy the melody of these languages and remember pronunciation and vocabulary.

The [science of language learning](#) shows that not only is the previously considered “critical period” of language acquisition longer than previously thought but that multilingual people are “mental jugglers”. Music is a way to keep your language juggling fluid and natural.

It’s so simple. Yet sometimes it feels like I am talking to the wall when I tell people how lyrical songs can help people learn language.

I’ve given presentations about my book, [Language Is Music](#), to the US State Department (the Foreign Ministry of the US), various universities and to the [Defense Language Institute](#) in Monterey, California and I got many dumbfounded looks from language teachers when I explained how to use songs to teach language.

Really? I can use songs to teach grammar?

Yes.

The [neurological links between language and music](#) are vast but the basic thing to remember is that music activates more parts of the brain than language does, on both the right and left sides of the brain. So if you remember something to a tune, you are more likely to recall the information than if you just read it or heard it spoken.

Have you ever heard a song on the radio that you haven't heard in a decade and you surprise yourself by singing all the lyrics?

Music and catchy jingles can stick in our minds for years while names of people, places, verb conjugation charts and memorized data disappear.

Example:

Just yesterday, I was writing an email to someone in Spanish and telling him that I needed to dust off my Thai cookbook to remember the recipe for Thai coconut milk soup for a Lunar New Year party with my friends.

I'd never used the word "dust off" in Spanish before, but I recalled it from the song "Aunque no esté de moda" by Silvio Rodriguez, where the singer says:

"Desempolvemos algo las pasiones lejanas algo de aquellos sueños sin ventanas."

(Let us dust off something from our distant passions, something of those windowless dreams).

My words about Thai coconut milk soup were not as poetic or romantic as the words from the song, but it was my memory of the song lyrics that made me think of the word “desempolvar” in Spanish.

Music makes the puzzle of a foreign language come together

What happens when you hear something in a song is that you are opening yourself up to the greater global picture of the language.

Then when you learn what the words mean by using a dictionary or reading the translation of the lyrics or just guessing from the context, you are putting the puzzle of the language together.

If you start with the puzzle pieces (grammar rules, conjugation charts, vocabulary lists, etc), you may end up using those puzzle pieces as a sleeping pill rather than as means to learning the language.

Let yourself breathe in the language with music so you can get a rhythmic introduction to the language.

Music wakes up your brain to remember words

Songs are awakening the language capacity of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords who suffered brain damage caused by a bullet that passed through the left side of her brain, causing her to lose expressive speech. As reported in an ABC News special report

about her recovery, songs are helping the former Arizona Congresswoman regain her speech.

As the Nightline Special says, “When the music fades away, the words stay”. After listening to songs, Representative Giffords remembers the words from songs that she previously could not say. The music activates her memory of the words and ability to pronounce them.

If songs can help someone with brain injuries regain speaking abilities, then music can help everyone else learn languages. No more excuses!

A Few Tips

1. LISTEN then talk

Watch this video to understand the fundamentals of how to listen to a foreign language to learn. This five minute video can save you many hours of painful work later on to polish your accent. If you listen first to your target language, before speaking, you have a better chance of having good pronunciation. If you launch into speaking from Day One, you are likely to be speaking with a poor accent and it will be hard to rewire your brain later on to produce different sounds after you may have solidified your speaking patterns.

- There’s a reason we have two ears and one mouth. Listen first, speak later, then learn the grammar and write.
- Don’t rush into speaking. Learn the sounds of your languages first.

- It does not matter if at first you do not understand. You may start singing along without even knowing what you are singing. You are not only learning the rhythm of the language, you are learning new vocabulary.
- Relax and close your eyes. Turn off the lights. Lie down, sit in a comfortable position or play. At first, don't try to understand the words, just listen. Your mind needs to be calm in order to absorb the sounds. Your ears need no other distractions to properly hear all the high, medium and low frequencies of the language. Do this regularly.

Academic proof of why listening first makes sense

Dr. Paul Sulzberger, did his [PhD thesis in linguistics in New Zealand about how people learn Russian](#). He had one group of students who got to listen to Russian speech before formally learning Russian. The other group had no exposure to Russian at all. Those who spent time listening to Russian before studying it, had an easier time than those who had no experience listening to the language when it came to recognizing individual words in speech when they were formally learning the language.

Therefore, the exposure to listening to the language to pick up the melody and sound patterns before learning words and grammar was advantageous to the students. Listening is a major factor in language acquisition!

2. What kind of music?

Find music in your target language that you like. Seriously, it's not uncommon to find language teachers who aren't familiar with contemporary music in the language they are teaching and play

old songs that don't resonate to their student's ears. You have to like what they are listening to. It's best to find songs that tell a story so you can learn a story line. Stay away from music with profanity or inappropriate content.

3. Find You Tube videos

Go on [You Tube](#) and find music in the target language that they like. Some videos even come with subtitles in the target language or in translation. Videos may also help you understand what the song is about. This is especially important for visual learners because they can see the story being told by the lyrics and better understand what the song is about and match their new vocabulary to the images on the screen.

4. Write the lyrics

After listening to the song(s) several time to get used to its sounds and melody, students write the lyrics of the songs while listening. You will have to pause the music and rewind or repeat many times to get the words down. Some words will be hard to write because they may be idioms or slang that you haven't learned yet, but just write as much as they can understand. Compare the lyrics they noted down with the original song lyrics that you will provide them and see how well you were able to understand the song. Some CDs come with the lyrics inside the CD case. If you don't have them, look for them online on lyrics websites.

Resources

- www.lyrics.com

- www.azlyrics.com
- www.smartlyrics.com
- www.elyricsworld.com

If you can't locate the lyrics on the lyrics websites, just type in the name of the song in quotes in a web search. If you don't know the name of the song, type in the refrain or the lyrics you do recall.

5. Make a vocabulary list with words from the songs

Prepare a vocabulary list from the songs and quiz yourself. Delete certain words from the verses of the song and fill in the blanks.

6. Sesame Street for beginners

If you don't think that *Sesame Street* is actually a viable option for anyone over the age of five, think again. The Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California which trains staff from all branches of the United States military in different languages shows *Sesame Street* in Arabic to its Arabic language students. If GI Joe and GI Jane can learn to speak *al- arabi* with the Arabic equivalent of the Cookie Monster, then so can you! I don't know if the Arabic Cookie Monster eats baklava or cookies, but his message can reach you.

Note: [Sesame Street](#) has various international versions available on You Tube from Russia, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Egypt, Indonesia, South Africa, Brazil, Palestine, Jordan, Bangladesh, Japan, India and France. The best way to find the videos in those

languages is to do a search for *Sesame Street* and the name of the country or language. If you know the name of the program in the specific language, like *Plaza Sésamo* in Spanish, then use that name in your search on You Tube.

This post was actually my most popular guest post, written by [Susanna Zaraysky](#) who speaks seven languages with native to near-native accents and is the author of [Language is Music](#), [El idioma es música](#) in Spanish), a short and easy-to-read book on how to learn foreign languages using music, TV, radio, movies, the Internet and other free and low-cost resources.

Find Susanna on her [website](#) or follow her on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Picasa](#), and on [YouTube](#).

Soap Opera's and TV

Watching a soap opera regularly could really move your language learning along!

What, you say, you wouldn't stoop to being a soap opera aficionado even in your own language?

Me neither.

But watching a soap in your target language is somehow more entertaining, more captivating, heck, even more profound than in English.

Here's how I got ~~hooked~~ started, how it evolved, and what I accomplished along the way.

After studying Italian in a conventional, part-time, off and on, rather casual way for a few years, I thought that I would never become competent in the language unless I went to live in Italy for an extended period of time.

I needed immersion, complete immersion. I needed a family discussing their day at the dinner table, I needed old ladies haggling over the price of vegetables at the market.

In short, I was out of luck because there was no way that I could arrange this extensive immersion experience in Italy.

So I made excuses for my inability to move ahead with Italian and felt correspondingly sorry for myself.

But I kept revisiting this language that I love, and I thought: why can't I create immersion in my own home?

Okay, it would be a sort of fake immersion, but so what?

All the resources were there (see Aaron's blog posts, he's already listed them all for you), I just had to be a little creative.

Where would I find this family, this background of babbling Italians?

Un Posto al Sole, of course, Italy's longest running soap opera.

Here's how I started back in 2005 and how the learning experience snowballed:

- [Un Posto al Sole](#) (UPAS) is available on the internet to watch or download. It's on 5 days a week for 25 minutes. At first, I understood less than 50%, but gradually my comprehension improved. Now I understand almost everything. What a sense of accomplishment! If I don't have the time to sit down and watch, I load the episode on my iPhone and watch while I'm working out or just listen to the audio while I'm walking the dog or running the vacuum cleaner. The wonderful advantage of a soap is that the dialogue is almost constant, and the characters are using the kind of real language you would use every day. Plus watching the action gives you plenty of clues about what's happening even if you don't understand every single word. Oh, and don't get hung up about understanding every little thing, just let it flow. You'll get it eventually; I did.

- For UPAS episodes, there are 4-5 paragraph summaries available for each episode on websites like Blogapuntate. In the beginning, I read the summary to fill in what I didn't get by just watching. I gathered new vocabulary words to add to my "words of the week" vocabulary list. More importantly, these summaries provided the language that I needed to think about, talk about, and write about what happened in each episode.
- Who do I write to about UPAS? Incredibly, I found a friend on Livemocha, a woman about my age, who has been a fan of the soap since it began in 1996. We exchange frequent silly, gossipy e-mails about the outlandish occurrences on the soap. What frivolous fun!
- The official website for UPAS includes a fan forum which I sometimes read and also make comments, another great way to practice. The fan Facebook page offers the same opportunity.
- The official website also hosts occasional live video chats with the show's stars so I've even been able to interact with the actors over the internet. With some luck, maybe I'll be in Naples sometime when the monthly studio tour is offered.
- Since this is a long-running soap with tons of history, I can go to Wikipedia to read the complete history of each season and every character. It's hard to believe the characters that have had past relationships and which ones have returned from the dead!

- There are so many ways I focus on my target language while I'm watching my soap. I can look for examples of a specific grammatical structure, the future tense, for example. When I hear the future tense used, I write the sentence down or simply repeat it.
- Those short but loaded with meaning words that are so difficult to remember like but, however, besides, as well as, just like. either, let alone, etc. somehow solidify in my head when I hear them used repeatedly in context.
- I like to pause the video periodically and repeat what I just heard or mirror the dialogue aloud without pausing. Sounds easy, but it's not!
- To work on my pronunciation, I chose a character whose way of speaking I like. When I read aloud or speak, I try to model my speech with her in mind, and my intonation has become much better.

Finally, watching a soap opera is a cultural window. I enjoy seeing how holidays and birthdays are celebrated.

I'm fascinated by a linguistic roadblock that doesn't exist in English, the formal versus informal "you."

There's a real cultural dance that occurs around how individuals address one another, and I love seeing this played out on UPAS.

Being a devoted Italian soap opera fan has taken me from the intermediate to advanced level.

Give it a try, it can't hurt!

This guest post was written by EDLL community member Gail Brown of Traverse City, Michigan. While she doesn't have a drop of Italian blood, she discovered her inner Italian years ago while perusing Berlitz Italian for Travelers. She is primarily self-taught and continues to indulge her passion for, some might say obsession with, Italian.

Light Reading as Bridge

I just finished reading *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* for a second time. I finished the whole Narnia series of seven books last spring and am now working through them again.

In Turkish.

I love Narnia. I have read the series at least three times in English – I always save book seven for those especially trying seasons in life.

In reading through some of Stephen Krashen's writing, I realize that what I am doing is using light reading as a bridge.

Amazon tells me that Narnia's reading level is for 4-8 year olds. Not exactly rocket science, but the reality is that even Narnia has all the grammar of the language and a whole lot of new vocabulary to which my relatively small brain can be exposed.

Krashen says,

It is an effective way of increasing literacy and language development, with a strong impact on reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and writing. It is also very pleasant. In fact, it is more than pleasant: it is extremely enjoyable.

And with this last thought, I couldn't agree more. On to *Prince Caspian*.

Parallel Texts

A parallel text resource for learning another language is a book or text in which the target language and native language are presented side by side on the same page or screen.

The side by side nature of the text makes for a robust learning resource for language learners and can be a good source of [comprehensible input](#).

How To Use Parallel Texts

Parallel texts can be used in a number of ways depending on your level in the language.

Beginning Language Learners

As a beginner, you may want to read a paragraph in your native language first and then move over to read the same paragraph in the target language.

By reading the text in your native language first you are essentially priming your mind to understand and make better connections with the target language.

The context of what you read will be fresh and allow you to make stronger connections to words and phrases thus creating a good source of the comprehensible input necessary to maximize your learning experience.

I continue to encourage learners to avoid reading sentence by sentence. This encourages the mind to do more direct translating rather than allowing the input to get in and do its work.

Intermediate Language Learners

Start with paragraph by paragraph and as your command of the language grows, begin to read bigger and bigger chunks at a time. You want to move toward reading whole chapters and then whole books first in the native language and then in the target language.

Advanced Language Learners

As an advanced speaker of a language, you may want to begin to read parallel texts in the target language first and then use the native language section as a resource for paragraphs or expressions that you are not understanding.

Other Ideas

Parallel text can be a great way to get started reading target language literature written by native speakers of the language.

Novels written by national authors are often times difficult to read because there is so much cultural and historic knowledge, idiomatic expressions, and writing styles that are unfamiliar and difficult to understand for language learners.

Finding a famous novelist's work in a parallel text can be both a great source of language as well as provide tremendous insight into the culture of the people who speak the language.

For vocabulary, you can utilize the layout of a parallel text by highlighting the new word as well as the translation of the word on the same page. This provides a quick reference when reading back through the text. It is important to capture the new words you are learning that you feel are important, so be sure and write them down on a [flashcard](#) for later review as well.

Another idea if you are learning a third or fourth language is to find parallel texts in the languages you have and are learning and to forgo your native language all together. This provides input in both languages and could save you some valuable time if you are working to both maintain a language and learn a new one.

I'd like to find some Turkish/Spanish parallel texts for this purpose.

Finding Parallel Texts

Commercially produced parallel books and websites are available in the format above with both texts presented in this side by side manner. A Google search using the two languages and the term "parallel text" will lead to a host of resources both free and for sale.

So for example, in the search bar you would enter: "Turkish English parallel text" With this search you should be able to find

quality resources that you can read from your computer, print off or purchase.

The same parallel text environment can of course be created as well by simply finding a copy of the text in both languages. The easiest resource in the world to find for this is the Bible, but much in popular literature has been translated into most of the major languages of the world.

It is not quite as convenient to have two books to flip back and forth between and keeping your place in each may be difficult, but it works fine.

You can as well create your own parallel texts. I recently did this with *Sustaining*, a short guide written to help language learners create, maintain and protect their motivation, commitment and positive attitude toward the language learning journey.

[\[visit the Sustaining page to learn more\]](#)

(If you would like to undertake this project in your native language, please let me know.)

Parallel texts can be a great resource for language learners. In the Internet age they are more available than ever before and so I encourage you to give using a parallel text a try and see what you think.

VIDEO

9 Ideas for Finding Target Language Reading Material

One of the challenges many language learners face is in finding quality reading material in the target language. Outside of languages found in your geographical region, finding translated and even original literature in the target language can be a difficult proposition.

Reading is a vital part of a personal language learning program but if you cannot find [quality reading material](#), it is difficult to take advantage of this great resource.

In order to make your quest for finding more great resources easier, I have researched and now present 9 ideas to help you find your way.

[Wikipedia](#): Wikipedia is a great place to start finding the written word in the target language. 282 languages are represented on Wikipedia! Amazing and you can generally find something written about a topic that interests you. Start at the [List of Wikipedias](#), find your language and begin reading.

[Wikibooks](#): An EDLL reader suggested Wikibooks as another great source of content. Available languages are found on the left sidebar. Check it out!

Online Newspapers: There are newspapers written in most languages of the world. If you use [Google Translate](#) (or your

favorite online dictionary) you can get the translation for Turkish newspaper or Urdu newspaper or whichever language you wish to learn. Enter the translation into a regular Google search and you should find a host of online papers in the target language.

Many Books: Home to 36 languages, Many Books is distributor of free ebooks – mostly the classics and older works. Some of the books in the language section are written by native authors, others are translated works. Great selection and a load of download options – from Kindle to iPub to PDF. (over 20 different options)

Google Translate: I mentioned this earlier, but Google Translate is a great way to get in the door so to speak. It can allow you to search and find websites, blogs, online magazines, free ebooks and much more for your reading pleasure. If I loved fishing and was wanting to learn French I could get the French translation for “fishing books”, “fishing magazine”, “fishing blogs” and much more and begin my search in this way. Get creative. Try new and different combinations and have fun.

Amazon: Amazon is the clearing house of clearing houses for finding books in general. Finding books in another language on the other hand can be quite the challenge. If you just type in Spanish for example, you mostly find reference books. Here are a few tricks to help you find what you are looking for.

- Search in **Foreign Language Books**. This category was nearly impossible to find in the advanced search option, but once I did I found a list of languages in the left side bar. The most popular languages are listed and if you click on the

‘More Languages’ button it will show you a ton more. When you chose your language, make sure and look back at the left side bar where you will find more search options including things like Author, Format, Series (Star Trek, Little Women, Harry Potter, etc), Promotions and Availability.

- For a regular search, add the word ‘story’ or ‘comic’ to the language. (Spanish comic, Italian story, French novel)
- Find parallel text by searching for ‘Spanish parallel text’ or ‘Spanish-English story’
- Once you have found some books, use the ‘Format’ search on the left side bar to find audio editions, Kindle editions or even PDF versions.

Expats: Expats are people who have moved abroad and are living in the country of the language you are learning.

Most countries have online forums where all the expats can connect, share information, sell their junk and generally hang out. It is not uncommon here in Turkey to see regular posts asking for someone to bring something from the states or for someone to carry a letter or something back.

These forums could be a great place to first and foremost foster relationships with other language learners. But they can also be a great resource for learning material.

Posting that you are looking for someone to pick up some comic books, dvd’s, literature or magazines and bring them back to your home country is an easy way to get a hold of reading material.

It may not be as timely as Amazon, but learners on the ground will have a good handle on available resources. You will of course need to compensate your new friend for their efforts. Here are a few of places to look for expats I know of: [Expat Blog](#), [Expat Forum](#), [Tonguetide](#), [Expat Focus](#).

LingQ: LingQ is a site based on reading that allows you to mark and create flash cards for new words as you come across them. There are just 11 languages represented though they are quickly adding new languages so if the language you wish to learn is one of these, stop by and give it a try.

The Bible: The Bible is the most translated book in the world and is fairly easy to get a hold of. If you just Google search any language with the word Bible you can probably find it online to read or download or find information about where you can get a hard copy.

The EDLL Language Specific Resource Page: This is a work in progress, but I desire to make a great resource where you can find a ton of material in the language you wish to learn. I would greatly appreciate your help in expanding this page and so when you come across amazing resources, please send me a link and tell me a bit about the site. I'll get it added to the language you are learning. I need your help!

Those are a few of the ideas I have for finding reading material in the target language you are learning. I probably missed a few obvious places to find resources and so trust that you will tell us what they are in the comments below.

4 Considerations in Choosing the Right Book

Reading is an important part of an effective language learning program. As everyday language learners, it is essential that you find high quality reading material so that you can receive the maximum benefit from the time you invest.

Identifying high quality material is often a challenge though and today I want to offer four considerations that will help you find books that will allow you to be more effective, more efficient and have more fun learning another language.

I have been asked a number of times lately about reading and language learning and the difficulty of finding the right book as a learner.

By book, I am not talking about a text book, a grammar book or anything that you would “study.”

I am talking about [light reading](#); books of fiction or non-fiction that you can read for enjoyment.

Books that are fun but that still give you everything you [need](#) to learn more of the language and reinforce what you already know.

Books that provide lots of comprehensible input – language that has meaning.

Books that are interesting.

How do we know if a book is providing comprehensible input?

I think the main criteria is not that you are understanding every word, but that you are understanding the general direction of the story.

If you are not understanding what is going on most of the time, it is probably not providing a lot of comprehensible input.

You do need to have some tolerance for ambiguity, for pushing on when you don't get every point, but if your not getting anything, then the book is probably not giving you the comprehensible input you need to really make it an effective part of your learning program.

How do I find books for language learning?

Picking up books willy nilly is a poor way to find a book that will help you learn the language. Recommendations from other learners of the language are always helpful, but if you're on your own, I'd like to offer four considerations that will help you more effectively select books that will benefit you.

Consideration 1: Reading Level

The reading level of a book will do much to help you get into reading it. If you are a beginner, finding books at a lower reading level will allow you to more easily enter into the story, to enjoy the

book and to get the comprehensible input you need to make it an effective tool for learning.

[Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) is a great place to look for reading levels of the books you want to read.

Here are a few examples:

- *Green Eggs and Ham*: Reading level – ages 4-8
- *Harry Potter*, book 1: Reading level – ages 9-12
- *Harry Potter*, book 7: Reading level – Young Adult
- *The Da Vinci Code*: Reading level – Adult

It is of course not an exact science, but it gives you an idea of the difficulty of the text. But while reading level is an important consideration, it is not everything.

Consideration 2: Background Knowledge

Background knowledge is the stuff you already know about a certain topic, or in this case, about a book you are reading.

Background knowledge fills in the gaps and makes the text you are reading more comprehensible.

Let me give you two examples of this.

When I came to Turkey, I started reading John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* with a Turkish friend. I would read it out loud and because the book was rather short, we got through it in about a month. While my Turkish was at the low intermediate level, I was able to understand a lot of the story. I usually knew where we were at, who was doing what and why things were happening. I

was able to stay with the story even though I had to let a lot of things I didn't understand pass by. I was able to do this because for the three years before moving to Turkey I taught high school English and read this book aloud to my ninth graders for six successive semesters. I knew the story like the back of my hand. Had I been reading any other book, I would have followed very little if any of the story. Find books about the stories you know.

A second example is the person who is highly knowledgeable in a certain area who is reading a book about that topic. A bass fisherman reading a book about bass fishing. A knitter reading a magazine article about knitting. A Roman history buff reading about Roman history. The vast knowledge you have about a subject will open up the text to you. Find books about the topics you know.

You can create background knowledge fairly easily as well. I recently watched the second *Harry Potter* movie in English. I had been struggling through the book in Turkish, knowing that I was missing some key parts. In an hour and a half, the movie brought me up to speed and now the second half of the book is far more enjoyable as I am understanding much more of what is going on.

Consideration 3: Interest

Finding reading material that is interesting to you will do much to make reading a beneficial part of your language learning. This in some ways ties into the last point, but it goes beyond that. If you love fantasy, reading fantasy will be interesting to you. If you're interested, you're more likely to keep at it, to accept a bit of ambiguity, and to push on when the reading gets tough. [Tim](#)

[Ferris](#) shares his experience learning Japanese grammar through a martial arts book written in Japanese.

As a personal example, I used martial arts instructional manuals to compete effectively in judo while a student in Japan. My primary goal was to learn throws and apply them in tournaments. To avoid pain and embarrassment, I had tremendous motivation to learn the captions of the step-by-step diagrams in each instructional manual. Language development was a far secondary priority.

His high level of interest kept him at the reading. Read about the topics that you love, that you are passionate about.

Consideration 4: Book Length

The length of the book is another consideration that I encourage you think about. Finishing a book in Turkish gives me a tremendous sense of accomplishment. My confidence grows as does my motivation and commitment.

Reading in a new language will be slower, and getting bogged down in a long book can be discouraging. Finding books then that are a bit shorter will give you a greater chance of keeping your interest high so that you can finish them quickly.

It's important to protect your emotional state as a language learner. Choosing shorter books will stack the cards in your favor.

Getting Started

I hope you will find these four considerations helpful as you seek to find books to read in the language you are learning. Please note that these are considerations, not criteria. There are many

Harry Potter fanatics who will one day push through and love the nearly 1,000 page later books in the series even though they are above their reading level and are extremely long.

I encourage you to find a great book in the language you are learning and get started reading today!

Glance At Grammar

Before heading out the door last fall for a trip by car to visit the small city of Izmit some three or four hours east of Istanbul, I pulled out my map of Turkey to take a look at the route I would need to take to get there.

I didn't study the map. I didn't follow along to every intersection. I didn't memorize the names of every town and road and landmark along the way.

I looked at it. A glance and a bit more than a glance. I took in the major landmarks and figured out the general direction we'd need to go.

And then I threw the map in the glove box where I could find it when I needed it later.

As a beginning language learner I think it can be good to take a glance at the grammar structure of the target language by reading a summary of the language.

Don't study it. Don't try to figure everything out. Don't memorize rules and structures.

Take a glance. Get a feel for the general shape and structure and special features that the language has to offer.

And then set out.

Listen. Read. Watch – A lot.

(A basic summary of most languages can be found at [Wikipedia](#) or in the first section of the [Teach Yourself Series](#) of book. For further reading on this subject check out Steve Kaufman's [The Role of Grammar in Language Study](#))

Take Control of Learning Grammar

As independent language learners, one of the challenges we all face is figuring out what to learn next. And more specifically for today's post, what grammar structures to learn next.

In the language classroom, the teacher directs the course of study. A good grammar text or workbook will as well unpack the language in a step by step manner that eventually leads to exposure and hopefully understanding of all of the major grammar structures that a language has to offer.

In both of these cases however, the teacher or the text book is driving the learning and not you.

This works of course, but fails to acknowledge that we all learn at different rates and so learning this way can at times leave us feeling overwhelmingly bored or frustratingly behind.

Take Control of Learning Grammar

I am a firm believer that the more a learner takes control of his or her learning, the more effective learning will be. I also think that we learn best when we are focusing on the very next things we are ready to learn, not necessarily the next thing that shows up in the textbook.

The problem of course is that we are not experts in the field of second language acquisition.

How in the world are we supposed to know what we are “ready” to learn next?

How are we to decide what language structure we should focus on next to optimize our language learning experience?

Because I don’t pretend to write as an expert or for experts, I want to offer a simple idea for figuring out what to learn next. It’s an idea for everyday language learners and one I hope we can all use to maximize the language learning journey.

I have used it some and have shared it with others and while it is in no way a failsafe method for moving forward, it does offer a modicum of control for the independent language learner.

It in many ways reflects what Terry Marshall shares in *The Whole World Guide to Language Learning*:

You can become fluent without formal classes or teachers by concentrating on your own needs rather than on performing for a language instructor. To do that, you need a framework which

- 1. provides direction for your language learning*
- 2. focuses your learning on areas of personal interest, and*
- 3. systematically prepares you to deal with more complex language usage*

My desire in sharing with you today is to help provide direction for you learning while giving you a system that will allow you to deal with increasingly complex grammar structures. I have written

about my ideas here but have also included a video at the bottom of this post to help explain it better.

In order to use this idea, you will need to be able to read basic texts in the language you are learning. If you are just beginning, I'd encourage you to start with some basic instruction from a book like the Teach Yourself Series, with a program like Livemocha, or with another introduction to the language.

I would also encourage you to begin reading in the language as soon as you begin the language learning journey.

Step 1: Find an Appropriate Sample of Text

If you have been regularly reading as part of your language learning then you will want to use what ever you are currently reading. (If you haven't yet begun to read, I'd suggest starting now. You can read [here](#), [here](#) or [here](#) to help you get started.)

The text you will use should be something you are familiar with but which is not so easy that you know and understand every grammar structure used.

A good story book or a newspaper article could both be great texts to chose from and you need to find a long enough text to give you a good sample of the language. You may want to make a photocopy of the text as we will be highlighting and writing on it.

Step 2: Identify Known Grammar Structures

The first step is to read through the text with a highlighter and mark all of the grammar structures that you know and understand and with which you are comfortable.

Knowing what these are called or even how they work isn't really necessary just as long as you know what they are saying when you see or hear them.

Step 3: Identify Unknown Grammar Structures

Next, chose a different color to mark with and go back through the text highlighting all the grammar structures you do not yet feel comfortable with.

Some will be completely unknown.

Some will be so unknown you might not even know if it is a grammar structure or not. Others will be structures that you are starting to have a hunch about.

You may not know exactly what is going in with them, but you are starting to recognize the patterns in which they are used and to have a feeling about what they might mean.

Step 4: Identify Next Step Grammar

Now that all of the unknown grammar structures have been identified, find the next step grammar. Of the structures that were marked, which seems the one that you are most ready to learn.

That is the grammar structure is the next step and the one that you should begin to work on mastering.

Step 5: Make a Plan to Master the Structure

Now that you have identified what grammar you would like to work toward mastering, it is time to make a plan to make that happen.

1. Begin by reading a bit more and identifying every instance of the grammar structure. This will help give you a feel for how it is being used.
2. Write down five or six sample sentences from the text so that you can have a good look at how the grammar shows up and the context in which it is used. This will also give you a sampling of sentence to work from later.
3. Quite often, if you already have a hunch about the structure and if you are getting lots of comprehensible input, this focused attention will unlock the meaning behind it without ever having to consult a native speaker or a grammar resource. This kind of intuitive, discovery based learning of the grammar will help you make a deeper connection to it than if you had just looked it up in a grammar resource and read about it.
4. If you still have a hunch, but still aren't completely certain how to use the grammar or what it means, I'd encourage you first to experiment with it a bit. Write ten sentences using it and submit them to Lang-8 for correction or have a native speaker take a look at them. This feedback will either confirm the hunch or reveal your continued lack of understanding.

5. Whether you feel like you have the new grammar down pat or are still lacking in understanding, it would be a good idea now to take a look at an explanation in a grammar resource. By moving the academic explanations to the end, you allow your brain the time to make natural connections to the grammar. The explanation then can fill in the gaps and complete the learning journey. But I would encourage you to wait. You'll get it and it will be due to your own discovery rather than some book simply telling you the answer.
6. Finally, make sure that you find ways to incorporate the new grammar into each day so that it gets the repetition necessary to stick. Journaling, hand crafted audio and reading extensively are all ways to make sure you see it again and again.

Take Control

In this manner language learners can take control of their language learning in ways that they may not have imagined possible.

So whether you are bored with the status quo, falling behind or just looking for a way to change up your personal program for learning, this is a simple way to put you in control of the journey and allow you to answer the question, "What should I be learning next?"

VIDEO

5 Reasons You Should Write

For the vast majority of language learners, myself included, we learn another language so that we can speak it.

We aren't learning it so we can read the newspaper. We aren't learning so that we can write letters to people.

We may do both of these, and enjoy them as activities, but they are not the reason for our learning.

We want to speak.

We want to be in conversations in which we both understand and are understood. Speaking, not writing is why we learn.

If speaking and listening are the most important things we do with the language though, why would we spend any time worrying about writing? Reading we can understand, but writing?

I want to offer five reasons why I think that writing should be an integral part of your language learning journey.

And specifically, I want to ask you to consider a personal narrative in the form of a journal or a diary as the main focus of this writing.

I believe that writing has amazing potential to help maximize your language learning and significantly increase the rate at which you learn. Which of course will get you speaking sooner.

Here are my five reasons why writing will help you learn language better:

1. Our brains function in the same way whether we speak or we write. A message is created and transmitted. It just sends the message down a different pipe. If you take a moment to grab a pen and paper and write a few sentences you will see that you cannot write without speaking out the words in your head. In this way, writing is a stress free way to practice speaking. Because we get to write at our own pace with no audience, we can give our mind a tremendous amount of repetition with the grammar, words and expressions of the language.
2. Writing allows us to use all of the words and grammar forms that we are currently learning and to solidify those we have already learned. This goes back to the repetition mentioned above, but if for example, we need to hear or produce a word 30 times for it to begin to get “stuck” in our mind, we can significantly increase the rate at which we incorporate new words into our usable vocabulary.
3. Writing about our days in a journal or diary connects the words and grammars we are learning to the context of our lives. This context and emotional connection creates richer meaning and allows for greater retention of the material. We remember things better when we put them in a context that is familiar to our lives and that we are interested in.
4. The next step is to get a [native speaker](#) to correct these journals. Once corrected, these journals become an amazing source of integrated review which will allow you to easily and quickly review everything that you have learned. Language

learning too often is a race from A to B to C and we often forget much of what was presented back at A by the time we get to point D. If however we have journaled all along the way, looking back through these regularly allows us to reconnect with all of the grammar points and words we learned previously. This is what I call integrated review. To get your journals corrected, ask a native speaking friend for help or if that is not possible, check out the amazing FREE online program called [Lang-8](#).

5. These journals are also a great to have as a form of self assessment. There is nothing quite like looking back at your first journals to remind you how far you have come. If you haven't read [Yuki's story](#) yet, go back and read it now. It will help you understand this last point.

Writing is an important skill in any language, but now one we are usually interested in worrying about as we go about learning a new language.

But don't underestimate the potential writing has to be a great part of helping you learn that language. It is a maximizer and will enhance all that you are doing to learn. So get started writing today!

Many of you worry that your writing will stink.

Let me tell you a little secret - **it will.**

But it doesn't matter.

Even your blather is part of moving you forward and the more blather now, the quicker your blather will become poetry.

So get started. Do your best.

Write about things you love.

Have fun!

Yuki's Story

In 2002 I was teaching part time at the International Academy of Minnesota (IAM) while I worked at finishing up my ESL teacher licensure program at [Hamline University](#).

It was a tremendous opportunity to be able to teach part time while taking classes about teaching. The rubber met the road in a dynamic way and I was lucky to be able to do both at the same time.

IAM was an international preparatory junior high program catering to the world's best and brightest. I was one of the ESL teachers tasked with getting our student's English up to speed so that they could continue on to the very best boarding schools in the nation.

One activity I began to have my students do early on was to journal daily. I did not ask for proper spelling or grammar or give grades for anything other than effort in these journals and made sure the students understood this.

My only goal for them was to write.

To produce.

To formulate thoughts and put them on paper in English.

I would give the students a topic to write about and then allow them to write for about ten minutes at the beginning of every class.

When Yuki joined my class, she was fresh off the boat as they say and knew little more than formal greetings in English. She was a sharp kid, but distracted and had ended up at IAM because her test scores in 7th grade had kept her from entering Japan's best schools.

Rather than enroll her in the normal run of the mill schools there, Yuki's parents chose instead to send her to America where the system has a bit more grace for distracted fourteen year olds.

I debated whether I should have Yuki begin journaling with the other students. I knew she wouldn't be able to write much. I was young and didn't know better though so I decided to have her give it a go. I am glad I did.

The next morning I cornered Kaz, another Japanese student, and asked if he would take a moment to explain to Yuki in Japanese about the journal and what I expected students to do. I was writing the day's topic on the board and heard her begin to argue with Kaz.

"Mr. Myers, she says she can not write any words," Kaz informed me.

"That's okay Kaz. Just tell her to write what she can and not to worry. I won't grade it." I replied.

The reminder that it was not for a grade seemed to calm Yuki down, but as the other kids began to write, Yuki just sat there. I walked back and kneeled down beside her. She was nervous as I

encouraged her write whatever she could and not to worry about the topic on the board.

It went this way for some time.

Six months later, the class had been writing in their journals for nearly ten minutes when I asked them to wrap things up and put their journals away.

I was just beginning to get started with the lesson when I noticed Yuki in the back, still writing.

“Yuki, put your notebook away.” I called.

“One minute.” she replied and continued to write.

“Yuki, we need to get started. Put your journal away.” I called again, a bit more agitated.

“One minute.” she replied again and again ignored me.

This time I walked back. I was planning on taking her journal from her. But when I got back there and when I saw the two full pages of writing, I took stock.

Kneeling down as I had six months earlier, I put my hand out and stopped her writing. She was frustrated and gave me a look only a fourteen year old can give. I smiled at her and told her I wanted to show her something.

“Look how much you have written today,” I said, smiling.

“But Mr. Myers, I not done!” she said impatiently.

Then I turned her journal back to the very first page. The page from her very first day of being asked to write her own thoughts in English.

There were fewer than ten words in three sentences – none made any real sense.

Yuki looked at her writing. She was taken aback. I flipped back to where she had filled two pages with her own words.

“I’m proud of you Yuki. You have really gotten so much better at writing.” I said and smiled again at her.

As what she was seeing sank in, a huge sheepish smile crept across her face and then tears filled her eyes.

For Yuki it was a reward, a signpost on the journey reassuring her that she was moving forward, that she was learning.

And it was my reward too. It’s why teachers teach. It’s why I write here at this blog. There are few greater rewards than the knowledge that you have helped someone achieve their goal, that you have helped someone along on the journey – whatever that may be.

I hope that Yuki’s story is encouraging by itself. But I also want to add a few takeaways. I want to encourage you to be journaling regularly in your new language. Some of you don’t really see the point of writing, but Yuki’s story highlights a few.

- First, writing allows you to practice producing. When I write, I am speaking the words to myself in my mind. In fact I have

tried and I cannot write without speaking the words in my mind. So rather than my mind sending the message to my tongue and mouth, the message is being sent to my hands. But my mind is making the same message – it's just sending it down a different pipeline.

- Journaling allows you a form of self assessment. Looking back at your journals every six months or so offers tremendous proof that you are improving. This is also why I would encourage you to begin writing right away. Write everything you know. Repeat yourself if you need to. My early journals in Turkish are utterly moronic and extremely short. But they were a part of the journey.
- Finally, your journals offer a tremendous opportunity for high quality, engaging review of what you are learning. Think about it this way. You could make a stack of notecards with random vocabulary words on them and flip through them everyday. Or you could write about your day – everyday – including the new words you are learning. Now the words have context and emotion attached to them. Work together with a native speaker to clean up the grammar of your journals and you suddenly have what I call integrated review, allowing you to bring all the lessons you have learned along with you as you progress in your new language. And to improve on this idea even more, consider having a native speaker record your journals so you can carry them around on your ipod to listen to a few minutes at a time throughout your day.

Those are just a few ideas about journaling and writing.

Online Lessons and Programs

One of the struggles beginning language learners can face is that of finding a structure to help guide the learning journey.

Not knowing what to do or how to progress can be a pretty frustrating place.

There are a growing number of programs online and for purchase that can help fill in this gap and give learners a sense of structure to help them at least get off to a strong start.

Rosetta Stone is probably the most famous of these programs with it's slick marketing and plentiful kiosks at every airport. I used Rosetta Stone to help me get started learning Turkish while I was still in the U.S.

It offers a steadily expanding range of both grammatical structures and vocabulary and works in regular review. And for that, it can be a great part of an overall language learning program.

But there are many programs similar to Rosetta Stone online and in stores and all of them do one thing well.

They give a learner comprehensible input in a structured manner.

Are any of them a silver bullet? **Absolutely not!**

Do all of them oversell what their program can do for language learners? **Without a doubt.**

But if you can get past the hype they can be a great addition to your language learning plan. They are easy to use, convenient and offer pretty high quality comprehensible input.

Here is a list of such programs for you to explore:

[Rosetta Stone](#)

[Pimsleur](#)

[Live Mocha](#)

[Busuu](#)

[Mango Languages](#)

[Fluenz](#)

[Rocket Languages](#)

Living Language

Transparent Language

[Byki](#)

[Duolingo](#)

[LingQ](#)

Repeat, Reread, Rewatch, Relisten

I always find it interesting when hear someone respond when asked if they have worked on mastering the language involved in discussing a holiday like Thanksgiving for example that, “*I have already studied that.*”

It is as though one pass through the chapter in the text book or one session with a language helper has somehow given them all the information they will ever need about a certain topic.

It could be any topic really, but it is as though they could plug their mind into a language and culture database and instantly download all the relevant information – words, phrases, beliefs, nuances and history of a particular topic.

Oh that it were so. Our lives would be so much easier.

But language – like life – does not work that way.

And so my encouragement with this short post is to go ahead and pass over the material one more time.

Do not shy away from talking with one more person about a particular topic and certainly do not assume that there is but one way, one word or phrase or belief that is used to convey a certain meaning, that is called upon to express an idea.

Languages are too deep and broad and nuanced to not visit each area more than once.

Certainly, as we learn new languages we need to continually be pushing out into new territory and exploring new topics and the words and phrases used to discuss them.

But we also need to keep going back so that we can go deeper.

So don't be afraid to pass over old material more than once, to repeat, rewatch, reread and relisten.

The Stack

I always carry a stack of 10-15 note cards with the expressions, grammar forms, proverbs, example sentences, etc. that I am currently learning written on them.

For example, once after seeing a guy out selling his wares in the cold, wondered how to ask, “How do you stay warm in this weather?”

I worked on it with my language helper, writing it in my big spiral notebook that I use for lessons.

Then I forgot about it.

Well, I looked it back up today, wrote it on a note card and put it with the other things I have been working on.

Now I can pull the cards out on the bus, while I am standing in line or right before I see the guy selling his wares, standing in the cold – and quickly review them.

It always helps me to solidify what I am learning and lock key phrases in my mind.

This is especially good since I am living in the culture of the language I am learning.

Warm Up

We have all seen it happen.

We are watching the big game or the 100 meter dash at the Olympics. An athlete is running at full speed and suddenly it happens.

They pull up hobbling, grabbing the back of their leg. If it's bad enough, they fall to the ground writhing in pain.

They have pulled a hamstring and their day in the sun is done. At the interview afterwards, the prognosis is often the same.

"I guess I didn't warm up good enough. My legs were cold."

As language learners, we too would do well to take the time to warm up before heading out to interact with native speakers.

Last week I needed to go to the Emniyet, the government office that issues residence permits here in Turkey.

The day before I had been reading another language learner's [blog](#) about talking to a professor of theirs and feeling like it didn't go too well.

The language had suddenly disappeared it seemed and they cut the conversation short and left discouraged.

We've all been there and it reminded me of the first time I had gone up to the Emniyet and things hadn't gone well. It had been first thing in the morning.

I hadn't said a word in Turkish since the day before.

I had gone in cold.

As I was thinking about the bloggers frustrating interaction and my own first trip to the Emniyet, I determined to try something different.

I have a twenty minute drive to this government office and so I put my iPod on and listened to audio files in Turkish that I have made. I know them very well and understand everything in them.

I was warming up!

I was turning on the Turkish switch in my mind.

I was dominating!

When I arrived at the office and the room full of police officers I was ready to engage.

Things went well. I was able to communicate well, understand the officer I worked with and left with renewed confidence.

By taking a few minutes to warm up, to listen or read in the language before you head out the door and into conversations with native speakers, you will help your brain prepare for the interaction.

We will be more successful, build your confidence and inevitably spend more time in the language.

We wouldn't run a race without warming up.

We ought to give our brains the same treatment as language learners.

Lesson Time

Time spent one on one with a native speaker with the express purpose of working on learning the language.

**Language helper:
a native speaker who is your resource
for comprehensible input.**

[Click here to leave your review of *Activities and Strategies for Everyday Language Learners* on Amazon.](#)

A Language Helper

I have talked often about using a “language helper” to learn the language and I want to take a bit of time to explain it today. But first I will talk about what a language helper (LH) is not.

A LH is not a teacher. They are not a tutor. They will not be experts in grammar – at least not any more than the average American is an expert in English grammar – who can tell me what a participle phrase is?

So what is a language helper?

A language helper is a native speaker of the language you are wanting to learn. They should be fairly outgoing, have a good accent in the eyes of their peers and be open to your doing a way of learning language that they will most likely be entirely unfamiliar with. They are not lesson planners and will not be planning the time you spend with them – they just get to talk and sip tea.

How do I find a language helper?

Finding a language helper can be a challenge. If you live in the target language context – either overseas or in an ethnic neighborhood – it could be as easy as exchanging English conversation time for your time with the LH. It could be a friendly neighbor interested in helping you learn his or her language so they can actually speak with you! Or it could mean finding a university student to pay the local minimum wage (or a bit better) for a few hours of their time each week. If you are still in your

home country, look for the ethnic communities in your area. It may take a bit of work, but you can find a language helper.

How do I work with a language helper?

So you have located a language helper, but what do you do now? Well, first off, you will be doing all of the planning for your time with your helper. It could be as simple as just choosing a topic to talk about. Or you could plan activities that give you loads of comprehensible input. You can see more of these activities in all of my [Tips and Ideas posts](#).

(Read: [*Two Hours with a Language Helper*](#) for even more ideas)

One thing you most certainly want to do is find out about all the real life situations that you will be encountering. I remember going through how to answer the door, how to answer the phone, what to say to get off the bus, how to order water for our home, what to say when I want to leave a home, etc.

You can find a great summary of how to use language helpers in the [LACE book](#) though and it would be well worth your time to look through it, download it or purchase it.

A last thing I would always recommend doing with your language helper is to record content. Record dialogues that you have generated with them. Record journals that you have written. Record anything you do with them. This will create a system of integrated review that you can take with you everywhere.

How often should I meet with my Language Helper?

Well, everyone has different schedules so you need to figure out

what works best for you. The most I ever met was four days a week for an hour and a half at a time. But even meeting once a week would be beneficial.

Other Resources

I think one important thing to think about is your beliefs about language learning. If you believe you have to have a teacher to learn language, this may not be the system for you. Having a good understanding of how and why to use a language helper is essential. Here are a few great resources to help you gain that understanding:

- [How to learn a foreign language with a language helper](#)
- [Kickstarting you language learning](#)
- [Language learning in the real world for non-beginners](#)
- [The Everyday Language Learner's Guide To Getting Started](#)
- [The Language Hacking Guide](#)
- [Six principles for the beginning learner](#)

I worked with a language helper exclusively to learn Turkish with encouraging success. I think, with a bit of preparation you too can have a great experience with a language helper. And I think one huge benefit is the added motivation you gain in knowing and developing a friendship with a native speaker of the language. This is perhaps the number one reason to find a language helper in my mind. Good luck.

Finding a Language Helper

I have written about using language helpers in the past but today I wanted to look a bit at how to go about finding a good one.

I want to be careful here lest I talk about language helpers as some sort of commodity – they're not of course. They are people like us with real needs, real personalities and real lives.

But as language learners, we do want to find people with whom we can work that understand how to help us grow as speakers of their language.

Finding a language helper can be a task that is not easy. As well, there are two different situations and we are all in one or the other.

You are either an expat living abroad or you are living in your home country where your native language is the lingua franca.

So I want to write a bit about finding helpers in both places and I want to hear from you.

Where have you found people with whom you can meet to grow your command of the language you are learning?

Here are a few of my ideas:

Home Country

So you let's say you live in Wichita Kansas. Where do you find a language helper? Here are a few places to start:

- **Local Organizations:** Most immigrant groups like to keep track of one another and tend to form organizations or clubs. These can be a great place to find native speakers. Here is how I would approach finding a language helper from a local language community. First – google “French speakers in Wichita” (or whatever language you are wanting to learn.) This will probably lead you to a few different groups. Second – Find the names of a few of the group’s leaders to email. Write a general letter expressing your desire to learn their language and to find speakers of the language with whom to practice. These groups may also have classified sections or list serves on which you may post a request for help.
- **Craig’s List:** It may be possible to find a language helper using Craig’s list. Write a short description of what you are looking for and be clear that you are looking for a native speaker to practice with and that you are not looking for a teacher or tutor.
- **Local Ethnic Stores:** Most cities will have ethnic communities and most of these communities are quite entrepreneurial. So there is also a good chance that small stores will open up, owned and run by new immigrants who of course speak the language. These can be a great place to build relationships with native speakers.
- **Local Universities:** Universities draw students from all over the world. Checking with your local university’s foreign student offices can be a great place to start.

These are just a few of the places you can begin to look to find a language helper. I would encourage you to think about a fair hourly wage to pay and to think about how you can be of service to the local native speakers – especially in the new immigrant communities. I would also suggest that you begin with a two week trial. This allows you and the native speaker a way out if it's not working.

Abroad as an Expat

Finding a language helper in the country of the language would at first seem an easier task. Everyone you see is a native speaker. At the beginning however there can be some very real challenges.

First of all you don't speak their language (YET) and they may not speak any of yours. This makes explaining what you are looking for a bit of a challenge.

Secondly, the idea of a language helper – as opposed to a tutor or teacher – may not be an idea with which they are not at all familiar. Few will think they are “qualified” but everyone is qualified – the only thing they have to do is supply the language – no planning, no need for grammar instruction, no teaching.

And finally, the cultural norms for hiring or helping may be ambiguous at first. That's a hefty list of challenges, but not one to fear. Finding a seasoned expat or an English speaking national to help can be a big benefit to getting set up.

Here are a few ideas of where to look to find a language helper:

- **Expat Forums:** Every country I know of has forums on line where expats can connect. They are also places where people can place classified ads and ask for advice. Posting to a forum that you are looking for a language helper will catch the eye of other expats who have used language helpers as well as nationals who are looking for work.
- **Cafe's Around Universities:** University students can be some of the best helpers. They also have fairly flexible schedules and are looking for part time – not full time – opportunities to make a little extra cash. I find that it is seldom difficult to strike up conversations with local students in these settings.
- **Classified Ads in Online English Language Newspapers:** These are read not only by expats, but also by nationals wanting to improve their English.
- **Neighbors:** In general I think it is good to keep business and neighbors away from one another. If something goes wrong, it can hurt a relationship that you have to live with. But neighbors could be great language helpers. Perhaps especially on an informal basis. I think about moms too. Staying at home with the kids can give you a great opportunity to rub shoulders with the other moms in the neighborhood – all of whom can act as informal language helpers.
- **Word of Mouth:** Perhaps the most reliable way to find a good language helper is by word of mouth. Ask other expats who they know who might be able to help.

Well there is the list. I am sure some of you have other ideas and I would love to hear them. So go ahead and leave a comment below or over on the [EDLL Facebook Page](#).

Word of Caution: At first your language helper will be a stranger and you will be a stranger to them. You don't know them and they don't know you. Protect yourself and them by getting to know them a bit through email or phone calls. Choose to meet in public places at first. This is as much for them as for you.

Twelve Resources for Finding Language Partners

Finding a native speaker to talk with if you are not living in their country can be a challenge. If you are learning one of the major languages of the world, heading to the nearest city will usually allow for easy access to new friendships with native speakers who you can meet and interact with face to face.

But if you live far from a major city or are learning a language that is not spoken by as many people, finding someone to practice with can be a big challenge. It is still possible though and today I'll give you a few FREE resources to help you get started.

To get started, you will need an Internet connection and most likely a program like Skype. You will also need a microphone of some sort. Video capabilities will enhance the interaction but aren't necessary. And of course you will have to take the initiative to reach out and invite people to talk. Go for it. You have nothing to lose.

Just a note, I have not yet used all of these programs personally for finding language exchange partners. I have not needed to at this point because I am living in Turkey learning Turkish. But here is the list.

1. [Livemocha](#): Livemocha is a language program, but with a social community built in. As you build your community of

friends, they can become language partners and most are eager to talk on Skype. 36 languages are offered.

2. [Busuu](#): Another language learning program with a social community built in. This is similar to Livemocha only it doesn't have nearly as many languages.
3. [LingQ](#): A great program and social community and a place where you can easily find language partners. It is only limited by the number languages offered, which is now at eleven.
4. [The Mixxer](#): The Mixxer is a dedicated language exchange site. You can read a review [HERE](#).
5. [italki](#): italki helps learners find tutors, classes and language partners.
6. [Google Plus](#): Google Plus is all the rage these days. I am playing around with it trying to figure out how it works as well. The "Hangout" function is the place where all the language exchange action will probably happen. I think the key would be to create a circle of native speaking friends with whom you could then talk with anytime you are online together. You can see how Mike at Look Out, Knock Head is using Google+ [HERE](#).
7. [Fluent in Three Months Forum](#): Benny opened up this forum just a month ago and already it has nearly 1,000 members. One forum thread is dedicated to helping language exchange partners find one another. Check it out today for language partners and a whole lot of other great reasons.
8. [Tonguetide](#): Tonguetide bills itself as the "language learner's social network". It is all that and more and offers a lot of

great opportunities for language learners, including finding language partners.

9. [Couchsurfing](#): Couchsurfing was created to help folks find a bed and new friends in their world travels, but has also become a bit of a social network in its own right and can be a place to find native speakers with whom you can speak online.
10. [Expat Blog](#): I listed my blogs on Expat Blog and began almost at once to get messages from Turks who have registered in hopes of finding language exchange partners.
11. Expat Country Forums: In general, expats like to create online communities through forums where they can share information. The largest in Turkey is called [MyMerhaba](#). These are places where information is shared, including information about language tutors, etc. Nationals are also using them to find English speakers for language exchange partners.
12. Language Specific Blogs: Some languages are difficult to find partners for due to a host of reasons. If you are struggling to find partners at any of the above mentioned sites, another place to look is at language specific blogs. People who are blogging about their journey in learning a lesser known language have probably figured out the best resources and would probably know how to help you. Two great language specific blogs that I have found to be incredibly helpful are [Navajo Now](#) and [Women Learning Thai](#).

13. [Skype](#): Skype has a forum for language learners to connect and find language partners. **This is a new addition to the list!**

These are but a few of probably hundreds of creative ways you can connect with native speakers from the confines of your own home.

I hope all of you will one day be able to travel overseas to use the language with native speakers as you enjoy their country. Until then, there is no reason not to begin now.

Give it a shot and see what works best for you. Don't give up if your first experience isn't great.

Try again.

Two Hours with a Language Helper

When I moved to Turkey, my wife and I each began meeting with a language helper as our primary method of learning the language. I began to meet with Mehmet several times a week for two hour time slots.

Mehmet is a university student, an avid Galatasary fan and an all around great guy.

He is not a tutor.

He is not a teacher.

He is not an expert in Turkish in the sense that he has no formal training in grammar or linguistics.

Mehmet is a native speaker of Turkish.

One of the challenges of the independent language learning journey and using a language learner is that you the learner are in charge of everything.

Classes have teachers who do all the lesson planning.

Mehmet just showed up, drank tea and spoke Turkish.

The direction of each lesson rested squarely on my shoulders. Because I desire to help others to take control of their language learning journey, I want to share with you today a basic lesson plan for one of my two hour lessons with Mehmet.

I should mention too that I immediately began writing my lesson plans in Turkish. This is not as difficult as it sounds. I would simply write *pronunciation, reading, journal, etc.*

But in this way, I etched a lot of common words as well as the days of the week and months firmly into my mind. Here is what a typical lesson plan looked like:

- 10 minutes: General conversation
- 10 minutes: [Pronunciation practice](#)
- 10 minutes: [Reading through, correcting and then recording a journal entry](#)
- 15 minutes: [Reading a children's story \(out loud\)](#)
- 10 minutes: Practice using the Turkish “since” and “until” forms
- 10 minutes: Break
- 15 minutes: [Needs Notebook](#)
- 5 minutes: Expressions Review
- 10 minutes: [Item Description with an IKEA catalogue](#)
- 5 minutes: [Number dictation with Time](#)
- 15 minutes: Writing sentences using the “if . . . then” and “when this happens . . . this happens” grammar structures
- 10 minutes: [Reading Narnia \(taking turns\)](#)

So that is a basic run down of what I might do in a two hour lesson with Mehmet. There are a lot of other [activities](#) that I would switch in and out.

I tried to always break things up into chunks of activities that I could really dive into and then move on.

I also tried to create ways to bring the stuff I covered in the lesson home with me – to double dip so to speak. Recording was always an easy way to bring what I had covered with me.

A healthy [stack of notecards](#) was another. You can read more about these activities in the links above.

For the others, I'll just have to write a few more language learning tip blog posts in the near future.

[note: most of these activities are featured in the coming pages]

Read Out Loud

Reading in the target language should be an integral part of your language learning journey – and it should be one that never ends as life long language learners.

The importance of reading cannot be overstated. However, if you pay attention to how you read in English (or your native language) you will notice that you do not read every letter, but rather skim through each sentence taking in whole chunks of letters at a time and easily connecting these chunks to words and expressions.

Our brains are quite amazing this way.

For example: // I tihnk the bairn is rrelay azmanig! Eevn tihs snectene is radebale.//

Could you read that?

If you are a native English speaker you probably could – *I think the brain is really amazing. Even this sentence is readable.*

When we begin to read then in our target language, our brain, which is trained to take in chunks, will continue its ingrained habit and skip right along through the text – especially as we advance in our knowledge of the language.

I find that when I read in Turkish this happens a lot – even skipping through new words or long pesky words that I really cannot pronounce well.

Taking the time to read out loud then forces your brain out of its old habits and into pronouncing each and every syllable – the way we would if we were speaking.

This is a good way to “train” your tongue and your mind to work together with the new rhythms, intonations and sounds of the language.

It will slow your reading down – but done in chunks of 10 – 15 minutes a day, “read aloud” time will be a great tool to improve your overall fluidity in reading aloud, as well as to improve your general speaking ability.

Give it a try!

Retell It

Today I would like to share an idea that will help with listening comprehension. I'll call the activity **Retell It**.

Though it is a simple idea, when intentionally done, it can create an opportunity to work on listening comprehension as well as receive a lot of comprehensible input.

As always, if you can record this activity, you will create a greater opportunity for integrated review and so I want to encourage you at the outset to consider recording any time you use Retell It.

Retell It

The basic idea is that you and a native speaker would agree to watch the same program on television and then retell what happened the following day. This could be a popular soap opera, a football match, a movie (or a scene from a movie) or a live event like a theater production.

The following day you will sit down with your native speaking friend and have them do their best to retell everything that happened in less than five minutes.

As they are retelling what happened you may want to take some shorthand notes of words or expression that you do not understand, but mainly you want to listen.

After listening to their retelling you will then want to share your thoughts about the program, ask clarifying questions and have a time of discussion based around the program.

This is a great activity because it is rich in background knowledge which will help create more comprehensible input. It is a great listening activity because you are able to anticipate what is going to be said.

And it will lead to a great place for you to practice speaking and using the language.

Here is the activity in bullet form:

- Agree with a native speaker to watch the same program or event.
- The following day, have your native speaking friend retell the event to you in five minutes or less.
- Share your thoughts about the event, ask clarifying questions and enter into discussion about the event or program.
- Consider maximizing this activity with any one of the ideas below.

Maximize It

As always, I like to think about how we can enhance any language learning activity.

A few ideas I have are to:

1. Record the retelling for later listening. This allows you to hear it more than once and to review new vocabulary and concepts in a context rich and convenient manner.
2. Have more than one friend retell it to you. This will create a narrow listening experience in which you will be hearing the same words and ideas but from slightly different perspectives. This too will help create a rich language learning activity and increase the amount of comprehensible input you are receiving. This could be easiest done if there is a big match that everyone will be watching or a popular television show that most native speakers are watching.
3. Write out a summary of the program or event before hand. After you have listened to them retell the event and you have discussed it together, read through your summary with your native speaking friend. Then correct your mistakes and consider recording your summary as well to create handcrafted audio for later listening.

I hope that Retell It will give you one more activity that you can used to help make language learning more effective, efficient and fun.

VIDEO

Number Dictation

Numbers are one of the most rule bound and regular components of any language. Every language has a clear and repeating system for numbers and outside of those pesky teens in languages like English and Spanish, this system never varies.

So numbers are really easy to learn right.

Yes, they are easy to learn and to reproduce. But why is it then that when we first venture out into the community on our first trip abroad, do numbers allude us.

The sales person says the price clear enough – but we miss it.

I once argued with a taxi driver in Mexico over the price he was going to charge our group for a ride.

In Spanish he said, “It will be sixty pesos.” I argued back, “No, we won’t give more than seventy pesos.”

He smiled. Then laughed.

Seems I got my “sixty” and my “seventy” mixed up. He was gracious enough to give us his price.

The problem is of course not that numbers are difficult to learn, but that we have just not had enough repetition with them for them to come naturally.

That takes time, and since we don't really use numbers all that often in everyday conversation, we probably won't get the repetition we need for some time.

Unless we cheat the system that is.

By cheating the system, we can give ourselves years of repetition in a very short amount of time – short chunks of time that will not only help us become fluent with our numbers, but which will also endear native speakers to us as friends.

The way we can do this is through number dictation. Here is how it works.

2	3	5	2	8	9	10	6	1	11	14	21
4	5	2	9	8	19	22	28	4	0	12	4
5	3	45	21	33	2	5	8	35	12	9	22
4	43	37	26	12	33	37	48	32	45		
2	29	31	13	2	7	9	26	48	24	37	
5	29	20	30	40	33	45	1	3	23	46	
2	39	44	25	38	27	35	45	2	7	4	
22	28	42	24	30	4	48	2	44	2	13	

number dictation notecard example

First, you will want to get a note card size piece of paper and write numbers on it in random order.

Start with the smaller numbers and then work up, adding 10s, 100s, 100s and so on as you get more comfortable.

Next you will need to find a native speaker willing to help you with this. This could be anyone – even the clerk at that Chinese grocery store – it only takes about a minute.

Start by telling them that you are learning their language and asking them if they have a minute to help you. Most everyone will be excited to help.

Hand them the card and ask them to read the list of numbers while you write down what they say.

As they say the number, you will write what you hear on another piece of paper. This forces you not only to actively listen, but to actively engage with what you are hearing – no daydreaming allowed!

When the list is through, you can have them check you answers and see how you did.

Then ask if they will listen and see if you say them correctly while you read the numbers. Read them out loud one at a time while they listen and follow along.

At the end, ask if you said them all correctly.

Through number dictation, you can dramatically increase the amount of repetitions with numbers.

In the course of one minute with one card you will have heard more numbers than you would normally hear in an entire week.

Do this activity a few times a week and your fluency with numbers will quickly improve.

Keep adding bigger and more complicated numbers. Make sure and load up on the numbers that are a particular problem for you (I would obviously want to add lots of 60s and 70s in Spanish).

You can also use number dictation for time and money.

VIDEO

Opposites

As a beginning language learner I was always looking for fun and interactive ways to engage with the language while out in the community here in Turkey.

Finding fun and time sensitive activities can open up new opportunities to speak the language and practice using what you are learning.

Today I want to share a simple idea for practicing while with native speakers. It will probably be a simple five minute interaction but will force you to actively engage with the language.

One fun way to practice your newly acquired vocabulary is through the process of thinking about and producing opposites.

I say big. You say small.

You can do this with anyone.

Anywhere.

Any time.

If you are a beginning speaker of the language, you will probably need to find the translation of a few password phrases first so that you can explain what you would like to work on.

Here are a few to get you started:

“I’ll say a word.”

“You say the opposite.”

“Now you say a word and I’ll say the opposite.”

With this translated and memorized phrase, you can practice with anyone, anywhere.

You would first need to establish yourself as a language learner who would like to practice for a moment.

Here is how this interaction once looked for me:

One morning I was going somewhere that required my riding the bus.

I decided before hand that I wanted to work on this and so prepared by getting a few phrases translated that I did not yet know.

On a notecard and in Turkish I wrote:

- *I am learning a lot of new words.*
- *Will you help me practice.*
- *I’ll say a word. You say the opposite word.*
- *Now you say a word and I will say the opposite word.*

And then I also wrote a list of a few words I wanted to practice: big, tall, wide, fat, clean, thick, hard, rough, happy, light, day.

I boarded the bus with this notecard in my hand and scanned the many passengers for what I hoped would be my willing victim.

Spotting a man who looked about my age, I sat down in the open seat beside him.

I was nervous, but turned to him, smiled and said in my very best Turkish,

“Hi, I am learning Turkish. Can you practice with me?”

He was a bit surprised but smiled and said yes and began asking me questions about where I was from and what I thought of Turkey and about America, my family and my life.

We talked in this manner for about fifteen minutes until he had to get off. We exchanged phone numbers and off he went.

I never got to practice my opposites.

I did eventually get to practice them with another rider on the bus that day, but I share this story with you to highlight the power of asking the question:

Will you help me?

Asking for help immediately opens a door with most native speakers.

By asking for help all guards are lowered as your spirit of humility will in almost every case lead to conversation, to relationship and yes, to the opportunity to practice the language.

The opposite activity is a great one, but even more important than great activities is the importance of establishing yourself, in humility, as learner of the language.

VIDEO

Wordless Books

As a teacher of junior high international students at Ambassador Academy in St. Paul, MN, I often looked for new and engaging activities through which I could help my students practice using their growing level of English.

One activity they loved was the use of wordless books. When I began to learn Turkish then, I quickly adapted this activity for my own use and found that it was indeed a fun and practical part of my personal language program.

A wordless book is a children's book that tells the story through pictures or illustrations only.

It is as you would suspect, without words, leaving the story to be told by the imagination of the reader.

As a language learner, these books offer a myriad of opportunities for practicing using the language you are learning.

[You can find a comprehensive list of picture books here.](#)

There are a number of different ways to use wordless books as a language learner.

Because of their vivid illustrations and intentional use of image to convey the meaning of the story, wordless books offer a context rich opportunity to create and receive [comprehensible input](#).

Here are a few ideas how you can do this:

- Find a native speaker and explain that you would like them to tell you the story of the book. Page through the whole book first and then, starting from the beginning, have them make up their own version of the story. If you have done a little homework before hand by looking up words for any objects you don't yet know, this activity will is an excellent way to receive a lot of comprehensible input.
- This activity can be maximized by:
 1. Repeating this activity with 3-4 native speakers. Each will have a bit different story, but the main vocabulary and features will be the same because the pictures drive the story.
 2. Recording the speakers so that you can go back and listen again later with the book.
- Another idea is to use half sheets of paper or large sticky notes and then to write the story in your own words in the target language. Share this with a native speaker to correct your mistakes. This too can be maximized by recording a native speaker reading your story.
- You could as well use the wordless book to simply tell the story in your own words the way you native speaking friends made up the story in the first example.
- You could also give yourself more practice by repeating any of the above activities using a different tense. If you told the story first in the present tense, retell it in the past or future tenses.

- Finally, you could create a sort of simple picture dictionary by using small sticky notes and labeling all the new words on each page. This provides visual representations for each new vocabulary words rather than translations.

Wordless books are a great resource for language learners.

Because we have two kids and my wife taught elementary ESL, we have a collection of these at the house. The *Carl* series was one of my favorites, but any will do.

Use one of the activities above or make up your own and make sure and let me know how it goes.

Picture Stories

Here is a fun little activity to throw a little spice into a language lesson or language classroom while offering a fair amount of [control over input](#) and opportunities for multi-entry into the language.

The basic idea is to tell a story.

You will need a random assortment of pictures of items that you want to learn more about or just learn the names of in the target language.

Then you will tell a story.

The story always begins the same:

“Yesterday after school I took the bus downtown.”

You may need to get some help making this first sentence in the target language and you can of course chose any meaningful first sentence to your story.

But after saying that first sentence, now you have to chose two pictures from your little pile of pictures and then incorporate them into a brief story.

So, lets say you pull out a picture of a motorcycle and an apple. You might tell a short story something like this:

“Yesterday after school I took the bus downtown. I got off the bus at the polices station and there were lots of motorcycles there. One police officer was eating an apple and talking to his friend. Then I went to the store.”

It is a very simple story, but at the beginning, it is the kind of **spontaneous yet controlled** type of interaction that can help boost comprehension, retention and confidence.

Repeat the activity several times continuing to work through new items to incorporate into the story.

In the end, you could perhaps write out one final and a bit longer story using all of the pictures from the pile.

This will give one last review of everything you have been using, create another entry point into the language and because you have now recorded in writing your work, allow you to incorporate review into the language learning journey.

**Adapted from New Ways in Teaching Young Children edited by Linda Schinke-Llano and Rebecca Rauff. TESOL: 1996. (pg. 99)*

Time - People - Action - Place

This is an activity that can be picked up nearly anywhere and done with any native speaker.

The first thing you will do is to create four categories:

Time, People, Action and Place.

Gather a small pile of scrap paper on which to write and then begin making a handful of cards for each category.

So for example in the Time card pile you may have five cards with a different time written on each: today, yesterday, this morning, this evening and tomorrow.

The People cards may have: I, you, James, we, the Jones family written on them.

Action cards should have verbs written on them that you are really wanting to solidify in your mind. Chose the five most important to you on that day.

And of course you will need to have a pile of Place cards: here, there, in the yard, on the street, under the car. With all of these, be creative and try to add into the activity the real life words and situations that you are wanting to work on.

Now the obvious use of these cards is for you to draw a card from each pile and then make a sentence with them – with a native speaker or expert speaker. The not so obvious choice though is

to have a native speaker draw a card from each pile and have them make a sentence using the words.

I would encourage you to begin this way. It allows you to just listen, to hear the patterns and how your friend puts the words together.

You also get to delay speaking and the stress that can come from trying to produce. Write down a few example sentences and perhaps record a few to listen to on the bus ride home or later in the day while you are preparing dinner or relaxing before going to bed.

You will want to switch roles and speak as well, but keep it random and have fun with the sentences.

Allow your native speaking friend to point out what you could have said better, but don't take it personally.

Keep it low key.

*Adapted from *New Ways in Teaching Young Children* edited by Linda Schinke-Llano and Rebecca Rauff. TESOL: 1996. (pg. 104)

Follow the Leader Journaling

I am a big proponent of journaling as part of an over all program of language learning.

A client of mine recently shared a way in which he journals with a language helper which I thought was worth passing on.

I called it follow the leader journaling in the header, but I am not really sure what it could be called.

The basic idea is to have your language helper or any native speaker take a few moments to write about a certain topic that is of interest to you and one for which you want to learn to talk about as well.

After they have written a few paragraphs about the topic, read it through with them in order to get a better understanding of the language used, to clarify words and expressions that you do not understand and to get the gist of the topic.

Next - and perhaps on your own time - write your own journal entry about the same topic. Your language helper's journal entry will be the model but now you will be writing in your own words, albeit, target language words.

Remember, this is one more tool in the toolbox, not the entire plan.

VIDEO

Hand Crafted Audio

[This post was a guest post I originally wrote for Benny Lewis's blog, [Fluent in Three Months](#)]

One challenge language learners face is in retaining the immense amount of new information taken in every day.

If you are like me, you come to words on a regular basis which you know that you learned once.

You look them up again or ask for clarification and wonder if there is not some way to remember better.

Flash cards help, but are a bit boring and lack the context necessary to connect them to the real world. They're also difficult to use while washing the dishes or driving a car.

What we need is to be able to integrate review into our daily routine in a way that puts the words, expressions and grammar forms we are learning and have learned in a context that is filled with both background knowledge and emotional connection.

One way that I have found to do this is by creating and using handcrafted audio.

Integrated review

Language learning is mostly an exercise in exposure.

The more we are exposed to words and structures, the quicker they become a part of our usable language.

First we begin to understand them, then we are able to use them, and then we get to the point of using them naturally.

I think this is why Benny is so successful as a learner – he makes it his priority to get the exposure he needs to learn the language.

The reason why learners so quickly master the core grammar structures as well as the most common words and expressions of a language is because these are the ones that we are exposed to most.

Their sheer volume cause them to be naturally integrated into the daily life of a language learner.

The trouble is found in the aspects of the language that are not part of the core grammar and vocabulary.

Left to chance, we might only occasionally hear these and thus we find ourselves in the cycle of learning and forgetting.

Integrated review then is the process of creating intentional exposure to all of the words and structures we learn at each stage of our language learning journey, effectively bringing them along for the ride.

Handcrafted audio will allow you to create opportunities for intentional exposure and greatly increase your level of retention.

Handcrafted audio

Handcrafted audio is **content that you have written in the language you are learning that is corrected and then recorded by a native speaker.**

These audio recordings then make their way to your iPod where they can easily be listened to again and again as you wash the dishes or drive your car.

By doing this you can create a library of recorded materials that will be an interesting and time sensitive way to review what you have learned in the context that you learned it.

Let's walk through the steps to making handcrafted audio. And since this is Benny's blog, let's use him as our example.

If you have been reading here at Fluent in Three Months, you know that before tackling Turkish, Benny completed his Dutch mission.

You also know that he faced an interesting challenge in finding folks with time to sit and talk. He did have two Dutch flatmates however.

By using handcrafted audio, Benny would have had one more opportunity to maximize the opportunities that he did have.

Here is what he would have done.

1. Write

Writing in Dutch, Benny would have began immediately to journal about his days. He would have written about the things he was doing and the people he was meeting using the new words and grammar structures he was learning as much as possible.

He might also have written about his childhood, his language learning missions or his future aspirations – things he would inevitably want to talk about with Dutch speakers. He would not have been overly concerned with grammatical correctness. If he had a hunch about a word, he would have experimented with it.

2. Edit and Record

Next, Benny would have sat down with his Dutch flatmate and gone through the journals, getting the corrections and clarifications he needed.

Then using his iPad or laptop, he would have recorded his flatmate reading these corrected journals. He would have then moved these audio files to a newly created “Dutch Handcrafted Audio” file on iTunes.

3. Listen, Listen, Listen

Benny would have listened to these files in his free time.

The handcrafted audio would have allowed him to review the words and grammar structures he had learned in a context he was familiar with, interested in and to which there was an emotional connection.

He could have listened to these files at any time – while washing the dishes, riding around town on the bike or while waiting for one of his new, but very busy Dutch friends.

By following this routine, writing and recording several one to two minute journals a week, Benny would have had entered his last week of the Dutch mission with 25-30 minutes of Dutch audio that would have contained a great majority of the new words, expressions and grammar forms he had learned.

These would have been presented in a high context environment that was interesting and extremely easy to listen to throughout the day.

Using handcrafted audio, even Benny might be able to speed up the journey toward fluency.

If you are wondering where to begin, first assemble the tools you will need to make handcrafted audio.

Here's what you need:

- A pen
- Some paper

- A recording device (most laptops and cell phones are now equipped with easy to use recording equipment)
- A dictionary
- A native speaker (in person is optimal, but you can find a native speaker through language exchange sites, Livemocha or could even have the writing corrected with [Lang-8](#) and recorded through [Rhinospike](#))

Handcrafted audio is not a method for learning a language.

It is instead a way to effectively and efficiently integrate the review of what you *have* already learned (and are in danger of forgetting) into the regular routine of your day.

I think you too will find that by using it, you will increase your retention of the words, expression and structures you are learning.

[You can read the original post [here](#)]

Dialogue Generation

Every language uses the ebb and flow of dialogue. When we communicate we both talk and listen.

Creating natural dialogues then can be an effective way to practice for the regular interactions that take place as we speak in our new target languages.

What is a dialogue?

If you been through any formal language school or paged through a language text book, you have probably come across the ubiquitous dialogue.

The canned conversations in these dialogues generally work to review whatever content the chapter of class session covered in a back and forth conversation between two speakers.

Dialogues are useful in that they present to you the learner target language samples in natural conversation.

Text book writers work to make these dialogues as real as possible and because of this, they can be helpful.

Here is a classic example of a dialogue I found for English language learners:

1. Hello. My name's Peter. What's your name?
2. Janet.

3. Where are you from Janet?
4. I'm from Seattle. Where are you from?
5. I'm from Madrid.
6. Are you American?
7. Yes, I am. Are you Spanish?
8. Yes I am.

The problem with canned dialogues

The canned dialogues found in text books and coursework can be helpful, but they lack some of the key elements that can make a learning activity truly good for you as a learner.

Because they are written by someone else, they lack the personal connection to you, the learner's, particular context.

They may be about topics for which you have little or no need to review.

They may be uninteresting.

And they may be outdated as languages change.

Still, there is much that is useful in a canned dialogue.

Basic grammar structures are present.

Real vocabulary is present.

In most cases, the interactions taking place are ones that you may one day use. In these regards, dialogues can be a useful activity for language learners.

Maximize: Take dialogues to the next level.

While canned dialogues can be useful, there is much learners can do to maximize their use as a language learning activity.

And of course, as always, it begins with you.

Dialogue generation is when you create your own dialogues.

Why rely on some text book writer when you can create your own dialogues that go straight to the heart of where you are as a language learner?

By writing your own dialogues you will be using the language and vocabulary that you need to learn to use. You will be practicing interactions that you know you need to be able to use.

By interacting with native speakers as you create your dialogues, you will know that the language and expressions used are up to date, based in the regional flavor of the language you are learning, and useful for you.

How to create maximized dialogues

1. **Make a list of all of the daily interactions** that you will be or are involved in as a new speaker of the language. A few examples might be: going to the bank to withdraw money; ordering pizza over the phone; telling a taxi driver where you

want to go; returning a product to a local store; asking for a recipe from a neighbor.

2. **Find a native speaker with whom you can role play each interaction.** This could be a friend, a neighbor or a language helper. Explain that you want to create some dialogues to help you learn how to navigate some of the regular interactions that take place every day.
3. **Set the scene and role play live to begin.** Don't go straight to pen and paper, but rather begin by having the native speaker take the dominant speaking part and role play as best you can the interaction you wish to recreate. This role playing will help you keep the interaction more natural. (Extra Credit: If you have two native speaking friends, having them role play with you on the sidelines with a video or audio recorder will help you create an even more "real" dialogue.)
4. **Write down the dialogue as it was naturally presented.** Working again with your native speaking helper, write down the dialogue. (Extra Credit: We all know there are unending variations to any interaction in a language. Write down several variations to each dialogue.)
5. **Record the dialogue for later listening.** The whole activity up to this point is great, but if you don't find a way to integrate the review of the dialogue you created into your daily life, you'll never remember any of it. Record it and listen to it often – especially right before you go to the bank or which ever dialogue you are about to interact with.
6. **Listen. Listen. Listen.** I can't stress enough how important it is to load these sound files on to your ipod or mp3 player

and listen to them again and again. If you don't, the whole activity may well be a waste of your time.

Dialogues can be an important part of your overall plan to master the target language and if done as I have outlined above, can be maximized for great results.

Take Action

Commit to creating one dialogue this week.

The Series Method

One of the cornerstones of maximized language learning is the ability to create opportunities for massive amounts of [comprehensible input](#).

There are of course a host of different ways to do this and much will depend on [your situation](#), but today I want to introduce you to the Series Method.

What You'll Need

In order to use the series method, you will need a native speaker with whom you can work.

This could be a language helper, a tutor or just a friend.

You will also need to know the basic words for the activity you will be doing.

Finally, the series method is best maximized when you can record it so some sort of recording device is also important. (Make a video to really maximize it for later review).

How It Works

The basic idea behind the series method is to allow you to hear a series of connected speech that you WILL be able to understand.

It will be comprehensible input.

You should be able to understand 70-80% of everything you hear in this activity.

Start by choosing a topic that involves steps or a process.

Making a cup of tea for example.

After you chose the topic, make sure that you know the majority of the words that you think will be involved: water, tea pot, tea bag, stove, burner, tea cup, etc.

Next make time to meet with a native speaker and make sure and bring your recording device.

Head to the kitchen (make sure you really make tea) and ask your native speaker to show you how to make tea, one step at a time.

They should be explicit and thorough and tell you everything that they do.

Don't forget to push the record button.

The focus of your time is going to be on comprehending what is said and done.

Because your friend will be picking up the things as he or she says them and doing what he or she says she is doing, you should be able to understand nearly everything.

Don't worry about the few things that slip through the cracks.

They are on the recording which you can review later.

Note: *If you are having a hard time getting your native speaking friend to understand that you want explicit, step by step, demonstrative instructions begin making the tea yourself in English. Model what you want and they will get it. They will also most likely get excited about this activity as they realize they are understanding English.*

Topics to Cover

There are literally hundreds of different topics you can cover with the series method.

Think about the daily chores that fill your life.

The series method will allow you to learn how to do all of these in the target language and give you a great foundation for your language learning journey.

Here are a few other ideas to try:

- How to unlock the door
- How to start the car
- How to turn on your laptop
- How to make a salad
- How to make a bed
- How to brush your teeth
- How to find your language files on your mp3 player

The options are endless.

If you do it as part of your day and it involves a process, you can have a native speaker create a series for a great language learning activity.

Maximize It

Here are a few ideas for maximizing this activity.

- To really maximize the series method, it is important to record it.
- Use the recording as a dictation activity and create a written record of what was said to be reviewed with a native speaker later.
- Video tape the activity and review it once or twice in a week.
- After listening to the recording and reviewing it, take the time to reverse the process. Next time you meet with your native speaking friend, YOU make tea and tell them the steps.
- Add the recording of each particular series to a “language” file on your iPod or mp3 player so that you can put the headphones on and know it will be played as part of your mix of language learning resources.

So that is the series method. It is a great activity to load your time with native speakers with comprehensible input.

It is easy to naturally implement into a visit with a friend.

You may need to learn a few [password phrases](#) to open up the activity if you don't know enough of the language yet.

And again, you could also just begin explaining how to do something in English using very detailed steps, lots of hand motions and good annunciation to demonstrate what you want them to do.

I think they'll catch on.

Resources used for this post: [The LACE Manual by Peter Pikkert](#) and [an article at Language Impact by Reid Wilson](#).

Sentence Expansion Drill

Sentence expansion drills can be done by yourself or with a native speaker of the language and are one avenue to practicing the language in ways that build upon the knowledge you already have.

The name does much to explain this drill, but the basic idea is to start with a core simple sentence and then to expand it one part at a time.

This is best understood if demonstrated so you might start with a simple sentence and proceed like this:

- I eat food.
- I eat food with a fork.
- I eat food with a fork at a restaurant.
- I eat lots of food with a fork at a restaurant.
- I eat lots of food with a fork at a restaurant with my friends.
- I often eat lots of food with a fork at a restaurant with my friends.

This is all pretty simple, but when you are beginning to learn a new language and to understand how the structures of the language work, this can be an intentional way to practice and give yourself a lot of repetition.

How It Works

You can do sentence expansion drills in a lot of different ways. The simplest is to just have these sorts of conversations with yourself about the things you see around you.

You could also do this drill on paper. This allows for a bit more reflection on the process and the ability to go back and check your sentences with a native speaker.

Another great way to do these sorts of drills is to do them with a native speaker.

Explain what you want to do and then start by making a simple sentences. Have your native speaking friend add one new component.

Then you add a component. This interaction allows you to get immediate feedback and clarification and will keep the sentences more real.

If you add something that sounds funny to a native speaker's ear, they'll let you know.

However you do the sentence expansion drill, they can be a great way to get some regular repetition with new words and grammar forms of the target language.

Sentence Transformation Drill

With the sentence expansion drill, the idea was to add elements and expand a simple sentences.

The sentence transformation drill is not about expansion and new elements, but rather about transforming the existing elements.

This allows the learner to again get a lot of repetition and practice, but this time the focus is on one element or concept and often focuses on the verb of the sentence.

Here is what it might look like:

1. Joe eats at the restaurant.
2. Joe ate at the restaurant.
3. Joe has eaten at the restaurant.
4. Joe will eat at the restaurant.
5. Joe didn't eat at the restaurant.
6. Joe doesn't eat at the restaurant.
7. Did Joe eat at the restaurant?

Each language is different and so this again allows you to tease out the nuances of the different forms of that languages system.

For example, in Turkish you might add what we call the “gossip” form, making a sentence that basically says, “Joe ate at the restaurant (I heard about his, but didn't actually witness it).”

Some language might make a differentiation in intent or the reason behind an action with different verb conjugation patterns. For example:

- Joe didn't eat at the restaurant (because he didn't want to).
- Joe didn't eat at the restaurant (because he wasn't able to).

These are the sorts of nuances that only time and practice can solidify in our minds and drills like this one can help speed the process.

Like the sentence expansion drill, this can be done in a number of different settings.

It can be done alone by simply creating this process in your thoughts or, if you are in private, speaking them aloud to yourself.

It can be done alone by writing out simple sentences and then transforming them in as many ways as you can.

It can be done with a native speaker.

You could say a sentence and then transform it as many ways as you can think of, receiving feedback as you go.

Or you could have some fun and switch back and forth – you make a change, the native speaker makes a change.

However you use the sentence transformation drill, I think it can be a nice element to add as part of your personal language learning program.

It gives you a way to intentionally practice all of the different grammatical forms that you are learning in a sheltered environment so that you are more prepared for success when you head out into the community.

Learning Directions

If ever you have spent any significant time living over seas, you have probably come across the language challenge of giving or taking directions.

- An innocent native speaker approaches you on the street to ask if you know the how to get somewhere. You understand the question, but when considering the challenge of explaining how to get there, you fall back to your default which was learned on day one, “I don’t understand.”
- You pull yourself into a taxi, telling the driver the name of your neighborhood and then use a combination of hand gestures and the simple commands, “RIGHT” “LEFT” and “HERE” to get yourself home.

Neither of these situations will make or break your day.

You will get home after all, but in the end, learning to understand and give directions as native speakers do is an important part of your journey toward fluency in the language.

But because these situations present themselves only rarely in our day to day life, they tend not to be learned and are left to the scrap heap of chance.

If we are to learn them though – and if your like me, you want to learn this skill – we must remove the chance and begin to intentionally work at it.

We must find or create activities that allow us to gain exposure to all the ways native speakers give and take directions and then we must incorporate them in a convenient system of integrated review.

It is in this manner that we can and will quickly master the skill of understanding and giving directions.

There are many ways to learn this skill but like everything we learn in another language, the path toward fluency lies in repeated exposure to the words and expressions needed and then adequate opportunity to practice.

We can either wait the long wait of frustration and discouragement or we can take control, create an artificial experience that will compact months of direction giving into a few short sessions and leave us with a system of review that will ensure what we have learned stays with us.

Materials Needed

To begin this activity, you will first need to find a native speaker/ language helper willing to work with you for twenty to thirty minutes. You will also need to assemble a few materials:

- one large sheet of paper
- one small toy car
- paper and pen
- a recording device

The basic idea for this activity is to simulate a taxi ride.

Within the activity, you will acquire all the language necessary to give and take directions in any situation, but the taxi simulation allows you to hear a host of other language forms and is immediately tangible.

Prepare for the Activity

Pre-Step One: You will begin by drawing a map of your neighborhood and surrounding areas on the large sheet of paper. Be sure and add as many traffic features as you can: traffic lights, roundabouts, off ramps, bridges, dead ends, etc. As well be sure and write the names of specific stores at corners, the names of parks, churches, temples or mosques and other locations in your area. Draw all of this big enough so that you can actually move your car up and down the roads.

Pre-Step Two: Find a small car to use as your taxi. I usually borrow one from my son but if you can't find a real one, you could just draw one or use something else.

Get Started

Once you have your map and your car, you will want to sit down with a native speaker and begin the activity. The idea is to hear how a native speaker would give directions to a taxi driver, to write these down and then to make group of recordings that you can listen to later.

Step One: Chose a beginning location and a destination on the map. Explain that you will be the taxi driver and that your native

speaking friend will be the customer. Encourage them to simulate exactly what they would do if they were riding a taxi in real life.

Step Two: Listen and obey as you hear the directions. Move the car along your drawn roads. (At this point, I would work on just listening and doing. Don't worry about the things you don't understand exactly, don't write things down yet, and don't record anything yet. Just listen.) Repeat this with different beginning locations and destinations seven to ten times.

Step Three: Listen and obey and mimic. Continue to repeat this process but now begin to mimic each command that your native speaker/language helper uses. Repeat this process seven to ten times as well.

Step Four: Stop. Take time to write down one or two example dialogues of a customer giving turn by turn directions to a taxi driver. Include both right and left turns, general directions and specific locations that are difficult to remember (for example, "turn right at the traffic circle" or "take a left after the railroad crossing").

Step Five: Reverse roles. Up until this point, you have been the one listening to the directions as they've been given. Now switch roles. Your native speaker/language helper will be the taxi driver and you will be the customer. Repeat with different beginning locations and destinations seven to ten times.

Step Six: Using the dialogues you created in step four, make a clear recording of each so that you can listen and review throughout your week. These recordings should be less than a

minute long making for easy, convenient review that you can integrate into your daily life.

Step Seven: Practice in the real world. Spend a bit extra and ride a taxi home in the next few days. Practice on friends giving you a ride. Also, make sure and listen to your recordings daily for review.

Why It Works

By putting yourself in the driver role, you allow yourself to hear a lot of input.

This input is immediately comprehensible because you already know where you are going.

This ability to anticipate what you will be hearing gives your brain more connections to hold on to and helps you learn faster.

As well, through the course of the activity, you will have connected with the language of ‘direction giving’ nearly thirty times.

This is more directions than most of us hear in a year.

By using a map and car, the activity is as near real as it can get without actually getting out on the street.

When you hear, “Turn right at the stoplight”, you will actually be turning a car right at the stop light.

Other Ideas for Expansion

Maximizing activities is something I encourage all learners to think about and to do. There are many ways that this activity could be expanded to make it more robust.

I would love to hear your ideas but here are a few of mine:

1. Change the age of the driver. Many languages require different forms of respect for different ages. How does the interaction change if the driver is a sixty year old grandfather versus a twenty one year old college student? If the driver is male or female? If the driver is obviously religious or not?
2. Explore the topic of ride etiquette. Is tipping required? Do people talk with drivers? Are there any concerns that foreigners should be aware of? Are ride fares generally trustworthy or not?
3. If you are a teacher, consider using this activity in the language classroom. Some adjustments will need to be made but be creative and have fun with it.

Giving and taking directions is an important skill that all language learners need to master sooner or later.

My hope is that this activity will help speed that process and allow your next taxi ride to be an exhilarating success.

Home Decor Catalogue

You probably have one laying around the house somewhere. **It is the home decor catalogue.**

Here in Istanbul, the catalogue of choice comes from IKEA, but any really will do.

It just needs to be filled with pictures of living rooms and bedrooms and dinning rooms filled with all the real life stuff we all use day in and day out.

IKEA does this exceptionally, but I suppose others do too.

But how do we use something like the IKEA catalogue for language learning?

Well, let me begin by talking about what such a catalogue offers:

1. It is filled with real life stuff, stuff you probably have and need to learn to be able to talk about.
2. It is random. Stuff is placed everywhere and there is lots of different things in each picture in random places – real places but not all in a certain order or in a row. This randomness makes you have to work a bit harder at interacting with the material.
3. It has location. Pictures on a page. Words in a dictionary are out by themselves. But stuff in real life is always someplace – on the table, next to the chair, under the bed.

4. It is interesting. The kid in the picture above is playing with an electric light. Is that kid doing a handstand? What is the little boy carrying in the strainer?
5. It is fun!

But how do we use them?

The way I want to suggest using them is to be done with a language helper.

In an upcoming post I will talk more about language helpers, but for now you just need someone who speaks the language.

As you work through the following ideas, always try and start small and then expand from there.

Here are a few ideas how to do that:

1. Begin by identifying objects in the picture. First learn how to say “what is this?” in the target language. Then point to an object and say, “what is this?” Start with three or four objects, moving in a random order from one to the other until you start to feel comfortable with them. Then add two or three more objects.
2. After doing identification for a bit, switch things up. Have your language helper give a command: Point to the boy. Point to the cup. Point to the faucet. This change forces you to switch into a very active and interactive listening mode. Decisions now have to be made whereas when you were just saying, “what is this?” you were really involving your

mind in a pretty passive way. It did not seem like it then, but it will now. (Note that at this point in time, you have not needed to talk really at all. You are just listening and interacting with the language. Speaking can and will come later)

3. After these two initial activities, you can take this a number of different ways. Here are a few ideas:
 1. Where questions: You will ask your language helper the simple question, “where is the cup, boy, faucet?” You will move through the room in a random order always repeating each item a lot. Again start small and expand. Have your helper respond in complete sentences, i.e. “The cup is on the table.” “The boy is in the kitchen.” “The faucet is on the counter.”
 2. Again, you will want to reverse this so that you have to actively engage with the language and make decisions about what you are hearing. One way to do this is with Yes/No questions or True/False statements. With Yes/No questions your helper would stick to the same items but ask: “Is the cup on the table?” (yes), “Is the boy in the bathroom?” (no), “Is the faucet on the sink?” (yes). With True/False questions the helper would just make statements and you will need to indicate whether they are true or false: “The cup is on the couch.” (false), “The boy is in the kitchen.” (true), “The faucet is in the refrigerator.” (false)
4. To add speaking to the activity, reverse the roles. First you say the object name and have your language helper point at

it. Then have your language helper point at an object and you say the name.

As you can imagine, this activity can be expanded in infinite number of ways. Through it you can learn:

- Prepositions of place (in, on, next to, over, under, etc)
- How to compare (the couch is bigger than the chair, etc)
- Colors
- Numbers
- And of course a great amount of new words and how we talk about them (is the shelf narrow or thin – are there two words for these ideas in your target language?)

It is also portable.

It is real life – we all have couches and beds and kids who play on them.

In order to integrate review into your daily life, it may be a good idea to take two IKEA catalogues – have one for your lessons and use the other to write the words of the objects (in the native language – not English) next to each object.

Also, write a handful of example sentences down for each of the things you are working on so that you can go back and see them.

Finally, if you are ambitious, record several minutes of samples of each round to listen to (with the catalogue) later in the day or week.

Stumbling Out of Bad Pronunciation

Pronunciation is an often overlooked element of the language learning journey so in today's post I want to introduce you to a handful of helpful activities and drills that will help you to improve your pronunciation.

It is regularly assumed that its importance falls far behind the importance of being competent in areas of comprehension and the ability to speak using correct grammar with a large base of vocabulary and expressions.

It is also assumed by many that pronunciation is something that can't be changed much, that some of us are just destined to sound like "gringos" while others have some sort of innate ability to get closer to native like pronunciation patterns.

There is of course truth in both of these ideas.

Comprehension and the ability to use the language well are more important than pronunciation and some people do seem to have an easier time with "sounding native."

But far too often these are used as an excuse to avoid working on something that everyone can improve at and in avoiding working on it, we are choosing to be less than excellent in all that we do.

It may help some of us to remove false expectations – sounding perfectly native is not the goal and probably shouldn't be a goal in your language learning journey.

However, sounding better than you do now should always be a goal.

But how do we do this?

I suggest that there are a number of things that we can do to help us all in improving our pronunciation.

The first is to step into a new realm of flexibility and willingness to be uncomfortable. A mentor of mine often said that “the first thing you need to get used to is the idea that you are going to be the town clown.”

This is certainly true with pronunciation.

If you are trying to make a new sound or a new pattern of sounds that you don't have in your native language, it will feel weird, awkward and uncomfortable.

In fact, **if it doesn't feel weird, you are not saying it right.**

The second thought we need to embrace is that language learning is a life long process – There is no finish line! Most of us want to take the two year course and then be done.

But if we quit then, we will communicate like someone who took the two year course and then was done.

Pronunciation is part of this journey.

The focus it requires will of course diminish over time, but we should routinely be reflecting on our whole language learning journey – pronunciation included.

The final idea I want to suggest at the beginning of your time learning language is to separate pronunciation practice from all other parts of the language learning journey.

I am generally someone who believes in a holistic approach to most things in life, but in this case, I think it can be helpful to set aside specific times to work on pronunciation exclusively.

Pronunciation is often a major source of frustration and blockage in learning a new language.

And at the beginning, while we do need our target language friends to help us with pronunciation, we all know the feeling of being constantly interrupted for correction.

It can do a great deal of damage to our often fragile confidence.

By separating pronunciation out, we can let ourselves off the hook so to speak and in many ways take a mental break from the arduous work of comprehension.

When setting aside five to fifteen minutes to work on pronunciation, don't worry about comprehension or any other part of the language.

Turn your mind off!

The goal is to train your brain and your tongue to do things they are not used to doing.

The basketball analogy.

In middle school basketball, I hated doing left handed lay-ups.

But we did them every day.

No defenders, just us and the open court leading up to the goal.

I sent a lot of balls sailing off the backboard or the rim and sometimes I never even made it to the goal because the coach also wanted me to dribble with my left hand – perish the thought!

It felt uncomfortable for weeks, but slowly and surely it became more natural and I began to make a higher percentage of lay-ups.

Then, over time, I actually got good at left handed lay-ups.

During these practice times though, the coach was not asking me to think about the new offense we were trying to learn or the defensive schemes we were using.

Just dribble, run forward and shoot a lay-up.

In setting aside time for directed pronunciation practice, there is much that we need to do that is really just training our mouths, tongues and minds to do things they have never done before.

And like basketball, there are hundreds of drills we can do to practice these new sounds and patterns.

Below I will give you a few of the more popular drills.

With all of these drills, you can greatly increase your ability to work on pronunciation if you use a recorder to record your sessions.

This way you can go back and work through the points again when you don't have access to a native speaker.

And speaking of native speakers, you can't really do any of these drills without one.

You should try and find a native speaker that is considered by other native speakers to have "good" pronunciation.

A great way to get the most out of all of these drills is to record them in the following pattern for later review.

1. Language helper says the word or phrase.
2. You repeat the word or phrase.
3. Language helper says the word or phrase again.
4. **Silence.** Give enough time for you to say the word or phrase two or three times when you listen to the recording later.

This pattern will allow you to hear each word pronounce correctly twice, a chance to compare your pronunciation to native pronunciation, and a chance to mimic the sound two to three times.

Record and Compare*

Select words, phrases or short sentences that contain sounds you know you need to work on. Record your language helper saying them normally but not too fast. Go back and listen to them and practice with them, repeating after the recording.

Next record again with your language helper, only this time record yourself saying them either before or after your language helper.

Now go back and listen to the tape again to see where you stray from the model and work on correcting instances. (This has the added benefit of allowing your helper to see just how serious you are about working on pronunciation.)

Single Sound Drill*

Select the consonant or vowel with which you are struggling to pronounce well.

Find or create with the help of a language helper, a list of words that have this sound in them.

Group them according to where the sound is found in the word: at the beginning, middle or end of the word; before or after a consonant or vowel.

Set up the drill so that you can practice listening to the correct pronunciation, mimicking and producing this sound. To do this, have your language helper say the first word.

Listen then mimic the word. Have the language helper say it again and listen to the difference. Go through each list in this way.

Sound Contrast Drill*

The sound contrast drill is much like the single sound drill except that you will add a second contrasting sound to the mix.

Find sounds that are similar, but that you are having trouble figuring out.

Many languages have the /o/, /ö/ sounds, or the /u/, /ü/ sounds. These often pose great difficulty for English speakers. One way to begin to work on these is to first make or find a list of each sound with all the consonants of the alphabet.

These are called minimal pairs. So your list would look a bit like this:

Bo Bő or Bu Bű

Co Cő Cu Cű

Do Dő Du Dű

Fo Fő Fu Fű

Your language helper can then say the first column word and you repeat it. The language helper would then say the second contrasting sound word and you would repeat it.

They are nonsense words, but allow you to really focus on the new sounds.

The next step is to find or create similar columns of real words. A dictionary can be helpful here.

Minimal Pair Bingo**

Create a bingo board with minimal pair words. For example, if you were learning English you might use the words: sheep/ship, pet/pit, car/call, pot/put.

This is a great game to play with a group of learners and a few native speakers. Make sure to choose lots of trouble words and sounds.

Building Backwards*

This is an activity that can really help you narrow in on the intonational characteristics of particular words and phrases. Longer words and phrases can be particularly difficult to master because our brains are still working through the first part of the utterance when the last part is already finished.

So for example, when I was learning a Turkish phrase used to signal my desire to get off the bus, “Müsait bir yerde inebilirmiyim?” I was regularly still on the “Mü” by the time my helper was finished saying the word.

Building backwards though help to break the phrase up and somehow improves the ability to work through the whole phrase.

So, you would have the helper say the word like this:

H: yim – you repeat

H: miyim – you repeat

H: bilirmiyim – repeat

H: inebilirmiyim – repeat

H: yerde inebilirmiyim – repeat

H: bir yerde inebilirmiyim – repeat

H: ait bir yerde inebilirmiyim – repeat

H: Müsait bir yerde inebilirmiyim? – repeat

It may be helpful to practice the separate words of the phrase in this manner before putting them all together.

Dictation

Dictation forces you to really listen and learn to discriminate the many new sounds of the target language. Have a native speaker read something slowly as you dictate what was said. It is better that these be phrases and sentences that you do not understand. A list of your languages idioms and proverbs can be useful here.

Tongue Twisters

Every language has them and most native speakers know at least a few.

Find out the Real Sounds

There is a tendency to see a letter in another language and pronounce it the way we would in English.

But this doesn't always work.

For example. Most of us know that Spanish has two 'R' sounds. One is the rolled or trilled 'R' sound. It sounds cool and is easily distinguished from the English 'R' sound.

But I did not know that the other Spanish 'R' sound was also distinctly different from the 'R' we use in English. The single 'R' is pronounced with a single flap of the tongue against the roof of mouth.

The distinction is small and not one that many Spanish speakers would take the time to point out (Unless they happen to be your Bolivian cousin Erica who is tired of hearing her name pronounced "airika").

So do a little research and see where the differences are found.

Well, there you have it.

A few ideas to help you stumble out of bad pronunciation and into the beautiful accent that will impress your friends and demand more respect.

Community Time

Time spent as a language learner out in the target language community among native speakers.

[Click here to leave your review of *Activities and Strategies for Everyday Language Learners* on Amazon.](#)

Help Them Help You

One key to being effective as an expat is getting yourself into the mindset of the full time language learner.

Another key, but one that is often more difficult to achieve is to get native speakers around you to see you as a full time language learner in need of their assistance.

Often they remain passive to pleas for help, not wanting to offend or discourage you.

But you need your regular contacts to understand that you want their help.

You want to foster in them a concern for your progress and a desire to see you grow in their language.

When you ask them a question about culture or a word or a grammar form, you want them to begin to think of all the nuances and other things you need to know about the particular topic.

You want them to not be afraid to correct you and let you know the 'native way' to say any particular aspect of the language.

Some people do this naturally and are treasures to find.

Others won't become the helper you need without a little help. A friend of mine shared this recent tip in regards to getting people to not hold back in correcting him:

I turn things around and encourage them to find as many mistakes as possible. If I'm properly going out with a girl, I say that for every mistake she corrects I give her a kiss, or with guys for every 10 mistakes they correct I owe them a drink.

The main point in sharing this is to encourage us all as language learners to take the initiative.

Native speaking friends skilled at helping you learn their language don't grow on trees, but with a little encouragement and a lot of persistence, we can help them help us – which in turn helps the relationship as our language improves.

Take Control

One of the keys in my mind for beginning language learners is control.

The word itself has a bit of a negative connotation, but in this sense **it is one of the more important aspects to a beginning language learners life.**

More important than classes, than text books, than good teachers and good friends from the target language.

All of those things can be great of course, but without control, your control, they may be worthless.

Control

You need to find ways to put yourself in control of the input you receive in the target language.

You need to set the parameters of your daily interactions.

You need to make the choices of materials for study and reading.

You need to be the boss.

And you can do it without being a jerk.

Just take control.

The Dumb/Smart Question

Learning another language in the community is always a challenge and so today I want to offer a quick language learning activity that you can take with you to the streets.

It is called the Dumb/Smart Question.

The Dumb/Smart Question comes from Dwight Gradin of the PILAT training and is one I really love.

I love it for a couple of reasons.

First, it has no limits. You can use it any where, anytime, with little preparation and at any level of language learning.

Second, it gives you the chance to hear a lot of different ways to say the same thing. We all realize that too often we learn a set phrase for a situation and then use it to death.

Dumb/Smart questions offer the possibilities of hearing the many ways native speakers might answer the same question.

In many ways, dumb/smart questions are a “live” version of ‘narrow listening’ as featured on this site.

How Does It Work

So how does it work? Basically you start with a question you already know the answer to.

Then ask a native speaker the question and listen to their answer.

For example:

1. Walk down the post office.
2. Walk around the corner from the post office and then ask the first person you meet, "Excuse me, but could you tell me where the post office is?"
3. Thank them and then pretend to go in that direction.
4. Then find your next victim. Ask them the same question. Listen to their answer.
5. Now go to the other side of the post office, or further away.

Repeat it over and again, listening to how people answer.

Are there basic patterns?

Some special expression that is routinely used?

Another way to use dumb/smart questions is in strategic shopping.

I needed a new watch about a year into my time here in Turkey.

I gave myself an extra half an hour and then stopped at every store that sold watches as I walked home, asking the same questions to each merchant.

By the time I stopped and shopped for a watch at my sixth or seventh store, I was feeling much more confident and had a

better understanding of what was going on, the names of watch parts, and how sales people sell watches.

In the initial stages of your learning, this can really help boost your listening comprehension.

Later, it can be a way to widen the scope of the language you use. I have been stopped and asked directions twice in the last week.

Both times I felt like my Tarzan Turkish was on full display.

This week, I plan to head out with my pocket notebook and ask directions a lot and write down the many ways that people give them to prepare myself for giving directions next time.

Dumb/Smart questions do what I think we need to work hard to do in all of our language learning – they give us a chance by giving us control of the input we are hearing.

When the pump is primed, things flow more smoothly, quickly and it sticks.

Grand Tour Questions

If listening to the same thing over and over again sounds boring, then the grand tour questions may be your ticket to a powerful and exciting narrow listening experience.

I have to acknowledge the work of [Greg Thomson](#) for this idea, but a grand tour question is one that probes the big picture moments in life.

Asked to several native speakers in a row, they can give you great exposure to similar content, grammar forms and expressions from different perspectives.

For example, you may ask four or five native speakers the same question about a childhood memory, their marriage or courtship, an aspect of their culture or about their thoughts on the future.

So for example, over a two week period here in Istanbul, I asked nine different people to tell me about their experience with the big earthquake of 1999.

Over and over the same grammar forms came up, the same basic set of vocabulary was used and many of the same expressions were repeated.

It was a rich listening experience and with each response I was understanding more and more. By the ninth person I was tracking with nearly everything she said.

And to put the grand tour question on steroids, consider recording each of the respondents so that you can listen again and again.

The only requirement for the grand tour question is that you find a native speaker or two. And this is easier now than ever before.

For you expats out there, it means walking out your front door.

For the rest of you however, while you do have to work a bit harder, finding native speakers is now easier than ever before.

It may be in the form of a language exchange – 30 minutes of English for 30 minutes of language X – but you can find it.

Also check in your area to find face to face meetings with native speakers.

Strategic Shopping

I am not a fan of shopping just to shop. I am not actually a fan of shopping at all. But if I must shop, I do figure that I might as well use it to my language learning advantage.

Strategic shopping is one way to do this. It is just one way to take control of the interactions that you have with the language and it's easy.

The idea is simple one: use the act of shopping for an item as an opportunity to explore the language as well as receive lots of comprehensible input.

I am not talking about the daily shopping that we do to get groceries, but rather the specific item shopping we do when we need/want a particular item.

Two years ago my watch broke.

I am a person who likes to wear a watch and so I decided that I had the money to go out and get a new one. I had two choices for finding a watch.

I could go down to the local super store where I could find a ton of different options in one location or I could walk the strip – the strip being the main road past our home on which stores of every shape and kind can be found – including a lot of small stores that sell watches.

I decided for strategic over easy. There are a few steps to strategic shopping.

Step One

Build background knowledge. Look up the words associated with the item you are looking to purchase. Digital, analogue, band, clasp, light, alarm, timer, stopwatch.

These were a few of the words I looked up and wrote in my notebook. This needn't take more than five minutes in most cases.

Step Two

Go to a store that sells your item and shop for it. Let the store owner know that you are shopping for a watch and that you are a language learner.

Ask the questions you want to ask. Listen. Ask for them to repeat things.

Ask them to write things down.

Thank them.

Leave.

Step Three

Repeat step two at another store.

Step Four

Repeat step two at another store.

Step Five

Repeat step two at another store.

I think you get the picture and of course you can repeat the process as much as you like.

Eventually you will need to stop and return to buy the most thought through watch of your life.

Conclusion

[Click here to leave your review of *Activities and Strategies for Everyday Language Learners* on Amazon.](#)

My hope is that this ebook will be one that you will consult regularly for new ideas and activities to make your language learning journey more effective, more efficient and more fun.

I'll continue to write, to hunt down new ideas and share them at the blog and in time, will probably update what you have here.

I'll need your help in that of course. Keep sending me your ideas for activities and strategies you've created or discovered.

Everyone can learn another language given a healthy bit of motivation, the right resources and a few high quality activities in the language learning toolbox to help along the way.

I hope I have added a few extra tools to your toolbox with this collection.

Thanks for reading and for supporting the work of The Everyday Language Learner.

Blessings on the language learning journey!

- Aaron

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I just finished Activities and Strategies for Everyday Language Learners, a great resource for language learners > <http://goo.gl/Ez7Ru> --[Click Here To Tweet This Now](#)