

What You Need to Know about Language Learning For All Ages



# Prolific Learning Series    Volume 5

## What You Need to Know about Language Learning For All Ages

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This book is the fifth volume in this series. It builds on the material in the first two volumes. You can get the other volumes from the **prolific-learning.com** website. The latest versions of all books in the series will be on the website.

**Sharpen your tools!** Anyone who has ever worked with saws or axes knows the importance of having sharp tools. When tools are dull, they do not work well. You can exhaust yourself and accomplish little. The quality of your work drops as well. It is a necessity to sharpen your tools.

**Sharpen your language tools!** Successful language learners carefully choose and take care of their tools. This is why they are successful language learners. In contrast, most unsuccessful language learners don't even think about this. They just do what someone told them to do. They use time and effort to try to make up for blunt tools.

**This book tells you how to choose tools and sharpen them.** It is meant to give you a foundation for language learning success. Take some time to sharpen the saws and axes before you start working. You will see much better results for your time and effort.

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# Chapter 1

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## **The Path of Language Learning**

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Author's Note: Much of the material in this chapter is a summary of the first two volumes of this series.

Think of what happens when you move into a new home. It is unfamiliar at first. Each day it becomes more familiar. After a time, it is comfortable. It becomes a normal part of your life. This is what learning feels like. It is moving along the path from unfamiliar to familiar.

How does this happen? Your brain is slowly building a structure of storage and retrieval. This



just happens naturally. It is storing memories and skills as you move around the new home. Each time you turn on a light or go to a room, you are retrieving and using the stored memories. Each day, your brain adds more complexity to the structure. After a time, you've gotten used to your home. Your brain has built a complex structure to navigate your home.

Language learning moves along a similar path. The new language starts out strange and unfamiliar. With consistent daily exposure, it becomes more familiar. With continued exposure over months and years, you start to master it. Your brain will slowly build a complicated structure of storage and retrieval.

## **Your Methods Will Determine Your Progress**

Many people sincerely work hard at language learning and see little progress. It is not because they are not working hard. It is not because they

lack a special gift or talent. It is because they are not using methods that work for them.

We are each different. We need to learn what methods work best for us at different stages of progress. Some methods will help us when a language is unfamiliar. Different methods will help us when a language is somewhat familiar. Other methods will help us when a language is more familiar. We must adapt and change our methods at different stages of progress.

When methods are working for us, they will be enjoyable and effective. When they are enjoyable, we will want to keep coming back day after day and putting in time. When they are effective, we will see progress.

This is the secret of successful language learners. They have figured out what methods work well for them at different stages of progress. They have learned how to learn languages.

## **Language Learning is like Remembering a Favorite Song**

Most of us can remember songs fairly easily. From the Happy Birthday song to our favorite music, most of us probably are familiar with dozens if not hundreds of songs. Our brains seem able to easily learn songs. Sometimes we remember part of a song after hearing it only one time. Sometimes we listen to a favorite song repeatedly. We don't set out to memorize songs. Through pleasant exposure, songs become familiar to us.

Learning to use a new language is similar to how we remember songs. As we hear particular combinations of tones and sounds over and over, they become more and more familiar. Language learning of course is more complicated, but the general process is similar. We need to set up a situation where our brain is being pleasantly and consistently exposed to the new language. This is how we help our brain build structures of storage and retrieval for actually using the new language.

## **Progress Comes From Brain Changes**

As discussed in more detail in the first two volumes of this series, we should measure our progress on a scale of unfamiliar to familiar to mastery. This progress occurs because our brain is literally changing as we learn.

We cannot rush this process of brain changes. It is like growing a garden. We can do things to help nurture and support growth. But, we cannot speed up growth beyond what is natural for us. A carrot seed takes a few months to grow into a carrot. We can help that process to grow a good carrot. But, we cannot turn a carrot seed into a carrot in a week. In the same way, our brain has a certain rate it can become familiar with a new language. The best we can do is to provide a good environment for this change.

Successful language learners have found what methods create the best environment for brain changes for them. This is what language learning is about. You must figure out what methods work best for you to change your brain.

## **Find Your Path to Walk**

What is the hardest new language to learn? It is probably the first one you try. This is because you have no practice learning a new language. You do not know what to do. You do not know what to expect. You don't know what methods work best for you. You don't know what it feels like if a method is working well or not. You might be making good progress and not know it. You might be making little progress and not know it.

Years ago, my wife and daughter hiked about 900 miles of the 2200 mile Appalachian Trail. The hardest part for them was the beginning. They had no idea what they were doing. They discovered the most important piece of advice everyone would give them. *You must hike your own hike.* You must learn what pace works best for you, what sights you want to see, and how often you need to stop and rest. If you try to hike someone else's hike, you are more likely to become frustrated and quit. It took some time to figure out what they were doing. They nearly gave up in the first few days.

However, they learned to hike their own hike. It became three of the most memorable and rewarding months in their lives.

The path of language learning you take will be different from everyone else. You need to learn what motivates you. You need to learn what works for you. The purpose of this book is to give some advice toward this end. Learn what path is best for you. It can become an enjoyable and satisfying walk for the rest of your life.

## Chapter 2

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# **Don't Eat the Menu! Enjoy the Meal!**

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The old saying *Don't eat the menu* has been around for ages in various forms. It means don't confuse a description of something with the real thing. This is a mistake that many beginning language learners make. Many spend much of their time learning descriptions of the new language. They consume reference materials such as grammar books, dictionaries, and memorization lists. They spend little of their time becoming familiar with the new language itself and consume little of the actual language itself.

Reference materials are aids like a cookbook or a menu. They are not the language itself anymore than a cookbook or menu is food. Learning to use a language is like eating food. You have to consume it for it to become part of you.

### **What is happening in your brain?**

The time and effort you put into language learning is building a structure of storage and retrieval in your brain. Build the right type of structure! Your brain becomes familiar and comfortable with what you spend your time doing. If you spend your time practicing using a language, you will get better at using it. If you spend your time memorizing descriptions of a new language, you will get better at describing the new language in English. A simple rule of thumb is that you should spend most of your time exposing your brain to the actual language itself. Read descriptions as needed when you have questions.



**A new language will seem like gibberish at first!**

Many new language learners do not know what to expect. They are often put off and scared by the fact a new language sounds like gibberish. However, this is perfectly normal. It is gibberish to your brain because it is unfamiliar. Your brain has spent a long time becoming familiar with your native language. It is used to those sounds and patterns. When it hears anything outside of that range, it rejects it as nonsense. *It is completely normal for a new language to not make any sense to you.*

The solution to this is to just start interacting with the language. You can read all you want to about how to swim, but until you hop into the pool, you won't learn to swim. It will feel strange at first. You'll probably get water in your nose and mouth a few times, sink like a rock, and probably do some hapless flopping. But eventually it will start becoming more familiar and fun. It is similar when you start to learn a language.

## **From Unfamiliar to Familiar to Mastery**

Learning to use a new language means that it becomes familiar. It starts out as unfamiliar and slowly becomes more familiar. As time goes on, you start to master it. It takes time for your brain to build a structure of storage and retrieval that naturally understands the new language. It will also take some time for you to get used to what this feels like.

There is a myth about language learning that seems widespread and rarely mentioned. Many people believe that spending herculean efforts learning *about* a language will eventually lead to skills. Failure to achieve skills means you either lack talent or didn't work hard enough. This is not correct. Think about it from the idea of building brain structures. Spending much time and effort learning about a language builds a brain structure that can describe the new language in English. To use a language requires a brain structure that reacts and interacts with the new language directly.

Many sincere new language learners diligently work at learning a new language. The majority of them do not gain much in the way of skills. It is not for lack of effort or lack of talent. It is from ignorance into what methods work best for learning to actually use a new language.

Don't eat the menu. Enjoy the meal. The ability to use a new language to any degree can be an enjoyable daily part of your life. If you are reading this, you should be capable of learning to use a new language. It's just a matter of learning how to learn languages.

## Chapter 3

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### **What is Fluency?**

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Many beginning language students have a mental picture something like this. They will spend years of hard work learning a language. At some point, they will become fluent and can do everything they dream of doing. There is one big problem with this picture. It is dead wrong and prevents many from enjoying the journey of language learning.

Fluency is a vague idea that is not defined well. This will be the only time I talk about it in this book. I think it is better to talk about progress and improvement. There is no single point where you can be said to be fluent. There is however a life-

time of continuous improvement where your ability to use a language becomes better and better.

Actual language ability is something you slowly improve on. It is like riding a bicycle. If you can avoid falling over and ride around the block, you are riding a bicycle. If you are competing in the Tour De France, you are riding a bicycle. Bike riding includes everything from riding around the block to competing as a world class racer. As you spend more time doing it, the better you become. Language learning is similar.

It is best to think of how comfortable you are using the four main language skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. It is best if you start enjoying using these skills as soon as possible. Even if you cannot compete in the Tour De France, you can enjoy a bike ride through a park. If you believe fluency is a magical point you will reach in the future after much boring hard work, it will stop you from enjoying limited use of the language now.

## Chapter 4

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# What Does Language Learning Feel Like?

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New language learners do not know what to expect. This is one of the hardest things about it. I cannot tell you what it will feel like for you. But, I'll tell you some of what it was like for me.

### **My First Experiences**

My first language learning experience was in the 1980s. I took two years of German when I was at a university. This was long before the Internet so audio and video materials were hard to find.

The only way students could access audio for the class was to sign up for times in a listening lab. I got straight As without once going to the listening lab. Instead, I diligently memorized vocabulary and grammar tables. I was good at it. I mistakenly believed I was a good language student.

In terms of actual language skills, I didn't have many. I could read a little bit using a dictionary and grammar tables. I couldn't speak much except to introduce myself and ask where the bathroom was. I probably could not have understood someone's directions to the bathroom.

I treated German like a math problem or logic puzzle. I'd look at a word and think about it. I'd then slowly piece together the words in a sentence. I thought that language learning was practicing thinking about the language. I believed if I could just think fast enough that I could speak or understand it.

A few years later, I started learning ancient Greek in the same manner. I spent all my time thinking in English about what Greek meant.

About 25 years later, I had not acquired any useful reading skills.

I did not know about prolific learning then. I didn't know about brain structures. I now know why I didn't have any reading skills in Greek. I was building brain structures that could describe Greek in English. I didn't build a brain structure that read Greek.

In all those years, each day I felt like I was making progress. I was making progress. It just wasn't in the direction I wanted to go. I wanted to read. Instead, I learned how to describe Greek words in English.

The best language progress I made was signing a little American Sign Language. My wife and I learned some from a friend who was an interpreter. The reason I gained skills was that I spent time practicing skills. I reached the point of holding basic conversations with patient Deaf people. Mentally, I was usually thinking with English words for each sign but using ASL grammar. I found ASL grammar efficient, intuitive, and ex-



pressive. It helped my mental discipline by forcing me to focus on the concept of what I was saying.

## **My Latest Experiences**

In the past few years, I've had more success because I've focused on building the right structure in my brain. I find that my brain is starting to react and use a new language. It's much more fun. I'm seeing satisfactory results for my time and effort.

I started learning Spanish using better methods. In about three months, I had more skills than I ever had in German. I was still a beginner, but I was happy to see the progress. My brain started using Spanish as a language. One of the first times this happened was in a thrift store. I read a sign as I walked past a shelf. I then realized that the sign was in Spanish and that I had simply read it. This happens more frequently now. This is what building a structure in your brain for a language feels like. You simply react and respond to a new lan-

guage. It just looks familiar and makes sense as you encounter it.

I now have three languages I use in daily life. I watch shows and movies in Spanish on Netflix. I have to pause, rewind, or use English subtitles at times because I miss things. But, I understand more and more. My skills are improving. I regularly read Greek. I often use parallel texts, but I can now read some genres fairly comfortably. I'm learning Hebrew, and have about 2 hours worth of audio material that has become somewhat familiar. I now relax before going to sleep by reading Hebrew. My skills in these language are not advanced. But I am improving and I enjoy using them. They have become part of my life.

Hebrew is the latest language I've started. It's the one I've made the fastest progress in. The experience I have learning other languages helps. I spend most of my study time *listening* to Hebrew and following along. I listen to the audio of Assimil lessons and audio of sections of two books in the Bible, Genesis and Psalms. I use a free website with an interlinear version of the Bible to follow

along. This has led to quickly developing reading skills. I can look at those texts I've been listening to and read them with a reasonable degree of understanding. This is the fastest I've gained new skills.

When I first started listening to Hebrew, it sounded like gibberish. I repeated the same audio over and over and tried to follow along. My brain started to catch on to Hebrew. Words started to jump out at me as somewhat familiar. It was like being in a crowded room with many conversations going on. It becomes background noise. However, as soon as someone says your name, it will often jump out at you. That is what this is like. Certain Hebrew words started to jump out at me. My brain was starting to build a structure to understand Hebrew. Over time, more and more words and phrases just seem familiar. After some time, I found I could look at written Hebrew and the sounds of the words would jump to mind. I was learning words as a series of sounds rather than as a visual memory of letters.

## **Unfamiliar to Familiar**

Remember that the path of learning is from unfamiliar to familiar to eventual mastery. As you learn to use a language, it will simply start to feel more familiar. You will hear words and phrases and they will just make sense. You will catch more and more nuances that differentiate things like singular and plural or present or past tense. Your brain will just start using the language as it becomes familiar.

Learning to use a language is *not* the same as analyzing it very quickly. Using a language is when your brain just reacts to it. It is not thinking about a new language in English.

This process feels somewhat like when a song becomes more and more familiar to you. When you hear a song for the first time, some of the melody and lyrics will jump out at you. As you hear it more and more times, it will become more and more familiar.

## Chapter 5

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# Pick the Right Tools

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Author's Note: This chapter is heavily influenced by my experiences as well as reading much material from successful independent language learners. It is based on prolific learning principles instead of a one-size fits all approach.

The language learning materials you choose will be the tools which you build language skills with. If you choose good tools, you will find this easier to do. You will see better results. If you choose poor tools, you will find this frustrating. You probably won't see the results you want.

## **What is the best course to use?**

I'm a member of a few online language groups. Many new language learners ask what the best course is to use. Here is the answer successful language learners give. There is no best course. Why do they say this? It is because we are all different. We each need to discover what materials and methods work best for us. We can get ideas from other people. But, we have to see if they work for us. You will need to experiment and practice. Every successful language learner has experimented and practiced to learn what works for them. Every language they learn helps them become better at it.

## **Good Tools are Flexible**

One thing about good tools and materials is that they are flexible. You can use them in many different ways as you make progress. A good tool can still be useful as you grow. Many successful language learners have a small set of tools and mate-

rials that they use in different ways. I'll give some details in the next few pages.

As you make progress, you will need to change and adapt what you are doing. Flexible tools allow you to do this easily. Inflexible tools make it difficult to adapt and change as you make progress. They will often at some point start to hinder your progress.

### **A Favorite Book in Audio and Print**

One useful tool for your language learning toolbox is a book you like. You should have both an audio and print version of the book in the new language (as well as a copy in English). It should be a book you will enjoy hearing and seeing over and over. If you can find a parallel text version or interlinear, that would be even better. (Those are discussed in the next section.)

It is helpful if the audio and print are convenient for you. This might mean a physical book or an e-book. This might mean audio on a smart-

phone or on a computer where you can easily pause, rewind, or loop the audio.

There are many learning methods you can use with the print and audio book. You can practice listening, reading, or speaking out loud. You can listen to sections over and over until they are familiar. You can follow along while listening. You can practice speaking with the audio to improve your pronunciation. You can work through sentence by sentence asking grammatical questions. There are many things you can do with such materials other than just listen and follow along.

A favorite book in print and audio can be a treasure chest of learning for a long time.

### **Parallel or Interlinear Versions of a Favorite Book**

A parallel version of a book has two (or more) versions of the book in different languages. Often one language will be on the left hand page while the other is on the right hand page. These will often



be formatted so that paragraphs line up on each side.

An interlinear version of a book puts a translation of a word directly under each word. The translation is rough and is not good English, but it gives a quick idea of the use and meaning of most words.

There are many methods you can use with such materials. They are also useful for following along with audio like a print book. A later chapter talks about different ways of reading.

These types of books are somewhat difficult to find. The Bible happens to be one book (or more precisely 66 books) with many parallel versions and some interlinear versions available. If there is a particular book or section of the Bible you like, you can probably find many free and commercial versions of print text, audio, and parallel texts available. If you plan on learning many languages in your life, finding a favorite book or sections of the Bible could provide much useful material to use.

## **A Favorite TV Show or Movie**

I've recently found Netflix to be a useful resource for much language learning material. A number of movies and shows have multiple languages dubbed and subtitled. Some DVDs have multiple languages in dubbing and subtitles as well.

One thing to note is that dubbed audio is usually recorded by professional voice actors. They have pleasant voices and clear articulation and are recorded in a studio with good recording equipment. It is often easier for a beginner to understand them than a native language show recorded in the usual manner.

If you have a favorite movie with audio and subtitles in different languages, there are different methods you can use with them.

## **A Bilingual Audio Language Course**

Many successful language learners use bilingual courses to start. A bilingual course is based on short dialogs or passages in the new language

along with a translation in English (or your native language). The audio will usually have the new language only. A typical lesson will have a short passage, a translation, audio, and some short explanations about language use.

I've used a few of the courses from the French company Assimil and found them to be useful. They have been producing language courses for several decades. They have courses available for many different languages. Unfortunately, it has become challenging to buy their courses in the United States since most online resellers do not list or price their materials consistently.

There are many free US government courses produced by FSI (Foreign Service Institute), DLI (Defense Language Institute), and the Peace Corps. Some of these are decades old and others newer. Some are extremely heavy on repetitive drills. They were produced by different teams for each language so content and quality varies. Many were produced as support materials for in-person classes. Some language learners find these to be good courses for beginners though many do not.

There are some websites which have these courses available for free download.

There are a wide range of language courses available in various languages from a variety of sources. It is worth reading reviews from a range of people before purchasing or starting to use them. Some will work for some people better than others. Some are a good value for the money and others are not.

My opinion is that the one important thing is that the course has extended sections of audio in the new language only. Audio which constantly switches between English and the new language does not give your brain consistent exposure to the new language. I also prefer courses with materials which can be used in different ways with different methods.

It is also important to note that there are different ways to use the better courses. The better courses are flexible and can be used in different ways. This allows them to be used at different stages of progress. It also allows different people to use them differently. Each successful language

learner has adopted methods of using these materials that work for them. You will need to learn what works best for you.

### **Be Wary of Hand-me-down Tools**

Most language learning materials you find on sale at garage sales or used book stores are there for a reason. They probably didn't work well for the original owner. Such things may make nice supplemental materials, but it's rare to come across materials that would make a good primary course to use.

Most of the cheap foreign language things I've bought over the years have eventually been donated or sold because I didn't use them. I've come across a few good finds, but most didn't turn out useful for me.

### **Be Wary of Test-Passing Tools**

There are some tools designed to aid in memorization for passing tests. If used properly, such tools

might be helpful for long-term language learning. If not used properly, they can be a waste of time and effort. Unfortunately, most students don't use them correctly. Many students put large amounts of time and effort into such things.

One prime example is using flashcards (or the computer equivalent). There is little question that using them will help you memorize and review facts. However, depending on how you use them, you might not be building the right structures in your brain for using a language. You might be building a structure that is good at passing vocabulary quizzes or tests.

Some successful language learners use such tools and find them helpful. However, they have learned to use them in a way that helps their long-term language learning skills.

## **Advanced Tools**

As you make progress, you might start to find that tools such as grammar books or dictionaries become useful. The quality and usefulness of such

tools varies by language and availability. Some are better than others. This is something you will need to research for your particular language.

I call these advanced tools because I think they can be a distraction at first. Remember that learning a language is about building a structure in your brain that reacts and responds to the new language. This happens through exposure to the new language. Reading in English *about* the new language builds a structure that analyzes the new language in terms of English. If you immediately mix using the new language with describing the new language in English, you will be building a structure in your brain that thinks *about* the new language in English. My opinion is that such tools do have value in *improving* your understanding and use of a language *after* a language has become somewhat familiar.

## **Be Willing to Pay for Good Tools**

You need to choose wisely to buy good materials that work for you. Some good materials are free or

low cost. Others might be moderately expensive (depending on your financial resources). There are two extremes to avoid. Don't spend several hundreds of dollars on materials that do not help much. Don't save money and then waste time and effort on poor free materials. If you are serious about language learning, some wise expenditures will be worth it.

When starting a new language, my expenditures usually look something like this. I buy an Assimil course for the new language. I used to find these new for about \$50 each on sale. I use our existing Netflix subscription for movies and TV shows in various languages. I might buy an audio book, print book, or parallel book that I will use a lot.

For now, free Internet resources such as grammar tables and dictionaries have been adequate for most of my needs. Please note of course that I would put myself somewhere between beginner and intermediate in the languages I am learning. I anticipate needing different materials as I achieve more progress. I'd try to get potential new re-



sources via interlibrary loan to first check them out for a few weeks before spending \$100 or more on a reference book.

# Chapter 6

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## Getting Started

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Author's Note: Some of these things are better demonstrated than written about. Over time, videos on some of these topics will be added to the [prolific-learning.com](http://prolific-learning.com) site.

The first thing is to decide what language you want to learn. I'm just going to give a few tips.

It should be a language you have a strong interest in for some reason. It is best if it is a language you could use on a daily basis. For most people, the point of learning a new language is to use it.

It should be a language with much material available. As a new language learner, the more

materials you have to choose from the better. You won't be sure of what works and what you like. It's best if you have many options.

If possible, it should be a language that is not too far removed from English. For example, French, Spanish, and German are somewhat close to English. Greek and Russian are farther away. Chinese and Arabic are even further away. The closer a language is, the easier it tends to be to learn.

Once you have decided what language you want to learn, get started. There are many ways to do this. Here are some possible ways to get going. You might use one of these or a combination. You need to learn which work best for you.

In keeping with prolific learning principles, what you do should be both enjoyable and effective. At first, being enjoyable is most important. As you start, you won't know what is effective or not. You need to make sure you are enjoying yourself so you want to keep working at it. You'll eventually figure out what is effective and what is not. Do

not fall into a mode of forcing yourself to do something. Find something different that is enjoyable.

## **Start Exposing Your Brain to the Language**

Your brain needs to hear a new language to become used to it (or see it in the case of sign languages). Do not worry about not understanding it right away. At first, your brain just needs to get used to the sound and intonation patterns.

You might prefer diving right in with a course of some type. You might prefer to test the water a bit first. Here are a few ways you can test the water first to just get used to things a little bit.

Pick a TV show or movie with the new language audio and English subtitles. Just start watching it on a daily basis. Of course, you are not going to catch much at first. But this simple exposure lets your brain get used to the sound patterns.

Find some music that you like in the new language. Listen to it actively or in the background. You might download the lyrics and use a site like

Google Translate or DeepL to translate them into English. Do most or all of your music listening in the new language. Pick music that you actually like. Do not force yourself to listen to something you do not like just because it is in the new language.

Such methods will not magically produce advanced language skills. What they will do is help lay a foundation for more learning using different methods and materials. Your brain will start to accept this foreign language as being somewhat familiar. This is a first step on the path from unfamiliar to familiar.

Some people might find a month or two of doing this before using other methods helps lay a foundation for more learning. Other people might find this frustrating and of no help.

You should experiment and see if there is some way to make one of these activities an enjoyable and regular part of your life. Learning a new language is about acquiring skills that enrich your life in some way. The sooner you can start using them, the more this will happen.

## **Work through an Audio Book**

Some people might find working through an audio book helpful. Others might find it very frustrating. Some people might find this helpful at the very first stages of learning a language. Other people might find this helpful later on after they have made more progress. This will also work differently depending on how close the new language is to English. You need to experiment to see if this is enjoyable or not.

The idea is to expose your brain to the new language. Do not try to understand it all perfectly at first. You are moving from unfamiliar to somewhat familiar. As days go by, more and more will make sense.

You need to have a copy of the book in both English and the new language and the audio. Do various combinations of listening, following along, and reading using the two different versions. Pick a few sentences or perhaps 20 seconds or so of audio and go through it some number of times. You can experiment as to what seems to work best.

This activity works best if done on a daily basis for an enjoyable period of time. This might be 10 or 15 minutes for some people and 30 to 40 minutes for others. Ideally, you should stop each day while you are still enjoying it rather than forcing yourself to continue. You could do this with poems or passages from a book rather than working through an entire book.

Some people will find this enjoyable. Others will not. If it works for you, fine. If not, do not force yourself to do it.

### **Start Interacting with a Native Speaker**

One good way to start learning a language is to just start interacting with patient native speakers. Some people might enjoy helping you learn a bit of their language. Some are willing to spend a few moments to help with pleasantries such as greetings, please, or thank you as well as correcting your pronunciation. Please note that not every native speaker will be inclined to do this. Also note that some cultures have different attitudes toward lan-

guage learners. Some are happy you are making the effort. Others will ignore you until you are competent.

If you have a good relationship with a neighbor, colleague, or friend, they might be willing to spend time giving you assistance. Such people can be a good resource and aid. Just make sure you don't become a nuisance to them and are reciprocating in some manner doing something helpful for them. You are getting free tutoring services.

### **Start Working through an Audio Bilingual Course**

Many successful language learners like to start with an audio based course such as the Assimil or Teach Yourself series. I've found the Assimil courses useful tools. Each lesson (of the 100 or so typically in each course) has a printed dialog or text in both English and the new language along with audio in the new language. Each lesson includes some explanations about the language.



For this to work well, you need to identify a course with materials that will work well for you. You will also need to learn what methods of using those materials work best for you. It is well worth learning how successful language learners use these courses. However, we are all different and need to learn what works best for us.

## Chapter 7

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# Memorizing Efficiently

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As you learn a language, you will need to memorize many things. You are going to put in a lot of time doing this. You will accomplish more if you study efficiently.

There are two ways you can memorize things. The first way is practice using the language so it becomes familiar. Memorization will naturally occur as familiarity grows. The second way is to spent your time memorizing lists of things. Most successful language learners start with the first way. Most language students start with the second way.

## **Learn by Doing**

When you become familiar with a language by using it, your brain is getting used to it. Your brain will naturally remember more and more words. More importantly, it remembers how they fit in with other words. It associates words with what you hear, read, speak, and write. The memory structure your brain is building naturally remembers many words and how to use them.

Becoming familiar with the language and naturally remembering words is a process. It takes time. Each word is being connected with many other words and things. Your brain does this at a certain pace and cannot be rushed. But once it does do this, each word is connected with many other words. You are able to put those words to use in some way.

## **Memorizing Lists**

Memorizing lists is faster. The more time and effort you put in, the more facts you can recall. Un-

fortunately, this comes at a cost. You need to keep reviewing or you will forget things. The reason is the structure your brain is building is too simple. Each new word in your brain will have only a few connections to English words that describe it. It's easy for your brain to build that structure. Unfortunately, you want to have many connections with other words in the new language. Those connections are what let you use a language and remember things longer.

Simple memory structures in your brain are easy to build but they fall apart quickly without maintenance. They give a false sense of making good progress in language learning. They also waste time that could be spent building real language structures in your brain.

Much of the material you will find about memorizing and learning is based on building simple memory structures. A scientist named Ebbinghaus first studied this. He memorized lists and kept track of how much he could remember each day afterwards. Many people have done similar stud-

ies since. They have discovered many things that can help you remember things for longer.

It is important to note that most of this helps you become better at memorizing lists of things. They do help. Many students have improved their grades by doing them. However, this mostly helps build simple structures in your brain to memorize lists. It does not help build structures for using the language. Only practicing using the language will build structures for using the language.

### **Don't Confuse Knowledge with Skills**

One common problem in language learning is faking mastery with memorization. I'm going to give you an example based on learning vocabulary.

In many languages, there are studies showing how much vocabulary people know at various levels of language ability. It is common to find lists of the most common 1000, 2000, or 5000 words in a language. There is a common belief that memorizing those words through hard work is an essential part of language learning. Many language stu-

dents create flash cards (or computer equivalents) and diligently memorize the words needed to bring them up to particular levels. This is often built into many courses with vocabulary lists to learn.

This all misses a very important point. Learning through practicing a language means your brain has a complex structure where the first 1000 words are connected with the other words and how they are used. Learning through memorization means your brain has a simple structure where each word is connected to English descriptions of it. These are two entirely different things. You could memorize 1000 words with either of these two methods. But your brain structure holding those 1000 words would be different. The one brain structure would be the basis for actual mastery. The other brain structure would fake it.

### **A Cautionary Tale of Two Language Learners**

One person has a favorite book with a few thousand word vocabulary. For six months, they enjoy

this book using audio and versions in English and the new language. They listen, follow along, and read this book silently and out loud for an hour per day. Some days they spend more time because it is fun. They might make it through the book a handful of times in the six months. They don't remember all the words but most are familiar. They can also guess many from context as they read or listen.

A second person works hard at memorizing. They put the words onto flash cards (or a computer program). They diligently memorize and review for an hour a day for six months. At the end of six months, they have memorized many of the words.

Think about what will happen if each stopped studying for a year. The reader could pick up the book after a year and probably remember much of it. The memorizer would probably have forgotten most of the words.

Think about what has happened in the brain of each person. The reader has started to build a brain structure that processes the language. The reader looks at a sentence and sees a unit that

works together that has meaning. The memorizer has started to build a brain structure full of isolated words. The memorizer looks at a sentence and sees a series of words. They look at each word individually, remember the definition, and try to puzzle out the meaning of the sentence thinking in English about it.

Each put in a similar amount of time. One has permanent gains in ability. The other had quick gains which are quickly lost without continued hard work. Language learners who invest in learning skills will retain more of the skills. As a byproduct, they will naturally remember many more words and grammar structures. Language learners who invest in memorizing lists will make quick gains through hard work. But they won't gain many skills and will quickly forget what they've memorized.

As a quick aside, some successful language learners use flashcards and memory methods and some do not. My sense is that those who do use them are not letting them replace actual practice of the language. I have the sense that this is for



learning rare words or particular things they are having trouble with rather than using them as a primary learning method to start with.

### **Strive for Real Mastery**

You want to build brain structures that actually use a language. Do not fake this by building limited purpose brain structures that only do one thing. Brain structures built around skills and using a language are more complicated, interwoven, and longer lasting. Brain structures built around memorization are more fragile and require review. They often do not empower you to use a language.

You can probably get better grades in courses memorizing words and tables to meet deadlines. Practicing skills is slower and probably won't meet the deadlines. You can also give yourself a sense of progress because you memorized 20 words this week and a particular grammar table. However, this type of progress is not practicing skills. It's possible to spend months and years making this type

of progress every day, but to have no skills. I say this from experience.

Invest your time and effort in practicing and acquiring skills. Let most of your memorization occur naturally by becoming more familiar with things as you practice them. As your skills progress, some targeted memorization might be helpful at times. But at the beginning, spend most of your time practicing skills.

## Chapter 8

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# Building Listening Skills

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In order to build listening skills, you are going to have to use various methods. You will also have to adapt what methods you are using to what works best for you. At different stages of progress, some methods will work much better than others.

Successful language learners (who can use a handful or more of languages) have enough experience to know what methods work best for them at different stages for progress. You are going to have to experiment.

In this chapter, I'm going to give some general advice based on my limited experiences and what

I've read from many other language learners. It will hopefully help you get started.

When I first started learning Spanish, I discovered a local AM radio station that I'd listen to during my 15 to 20 minute commute. I couldn't understand much, but I'd catch a few words here and there. I did this for a few months and then realized it wasn't doing anything for me. Instead, I started reviewing my Assimil lessons on CD. This did much more for my progress. Several months later, I listened to the radio station again and found that I was catching much of what was being said. At that point, listening to the radio station helped me improve. You will probably experience something like this. Different methods will yield different results at different stages of progress. As you hang with it and use methods that work, your ability to comprehend things will improve.

### **Getting Started Listening**

Keep in mind the path of language learning from unfamiliar to familiar to mastery. At the begin-

ning, you need to move from completely unfamiliar to a little bit familiar. Once you have some familiarity, you want to build on it.

At first, when the language is completely unfamiliar, you will have to listen repeatedly to the same things to gain initial familiarity. This might be audio lessons from a course, particular songs, or sections from a favorite book.

Remember that this is about letting your brain build a structure that reacts to the language. The first few times you listen, it will probably be foreign and unfamiliar. However, after some number of times listening, certain words will start to jump out at you. It will be something like sitting in a crowded room with a jumbled background of conversations and you suddenly hear your name mentioned. This means your brain is starting to make sense of the new language. As you keep listening over and over, more and more words and phrases will start to jump out at you.

A key point to this is to keep it enjoyable. As soon as it becomes boring or frustrating, that is probably your brain telling you enough is enough

for now. As discussed in the second volume of this series, your brain has a limited capacity for learning at one time. Trying to force it beyond this is counterproductive. You need to learn how long an effective and enjoyable listening session is for you.

### **Next Steps**

As your brain can recognize enough words, you can start to listen to more complicated and more extended recordings. Depending on the material, your mood, and your stage of progress, different methods will be better than others. You might find it helpful to repeatedly listen to sections of audio. You might find it helpful to listen to an entire audio book.

You need to figure out what is working best for you and what you enjoy. You might like to work your way through an audio book following along with a printed page in the new language. You might want to follow along in an audio book listening in the new language and following in an En-

glish version. You might want to repeatedly play one paragraph until it is familiar and move to the next paragraph. There are a variety of ways to use a recording and printed materials.

These different methods will work better at different times. You can also mix them together in various ways. One important key is that the method is enjoyable for you.

### **Make Listening an Enjoyable Part of Your Day**

As soon as possible, make listening a fun part of your day. You can listen to music that you like in your new language. If you have a recording of poetry you like, you might loop that in the background or just listen to it for fun. You might watch TV shows dubbed in the new language with English subtitles. These activities might not be effective ways to quickly improve your skills at first, but they will help your brain feel more and more comfortable with the new language. In addition,

they will help you get used to the natural rhythms, tones, and sounds of the language.

### **You Will Make Progress**

As you keep using enjoyable and effective methods and adapt to your progress, you will continue to improve. The language will become more and more familiar. You will be able to understand more as you listen.

At some point, you will be able to enjoyably listen to things like newscasts or TV shows with a reasonable degree of comprehension. This does not come overnight nor in a few weeks. However, with consistent daily exposure using good methods, your brain will just start to react to the new language. You will find yourself hearing things and understanding them. Your understanding will improve over time.



## Chapter 9

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# Three Ways to Read

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At the earliest stages of learning a new language, input is very important. It is how your brain is exposed to the new language. It comes through listening, following along while listening, and reading. Successful language learners debate when you should start working on speaking and writing, but there is no debate that input is important at all stages of progress.

As you start to make progress, reading becomes a very important means of input. The sooner you can start reading, the sooner you will be on the road to mastering a language.

## **Intensive Reading**

When doing intensive reading, you stop at each word and make sure you understand it. You might look up things in grammar tables or other reference materials as needed. Intensive reading is a good way to answer questions you have about a language.

Note carefully that most of your time doing this is spent thinking in English about the new language. Each description and reference you look at introduces many sentences and thoughts in English. Intensive reading does *not* directly help build a structure in your brain for using a new language. It does help you improve an existing structure to give you better understanding.

## **Extensive Reading**

Extensive reading is just another way of saying normal reading. The difference is that in a new language, you are okay with not understanding it perfectly. When you look at a sentence and un-

derstand the gist of it, that is good enough when doing extensive reading. You then go onto the next sentence.

When extensive reading, you are focusing on the big picture. The goal is having a general understanding of what you are reading. You do not worry about every detail you are unfamiliar with. Extensive reading constantly exposes you to the most common parts of a language over and over.

The end result of much extensive reading is that your brain becomes more and more familiar with the most common parts of the language. Your comprehension and understanding will improve. As you see things over and over, your brain becomes used to them. You will find that you simply look at words and phrases and just know what they mean without having to analyze them.

To do extensive reading, parallel texts are helpful. Having the new language on one page and English on the other allows you at a glance to catch any meaning you are missing. Interlinears are helpful as well. Electronic texts which allow definitions to pop up with a click can also be help-

ful. The goal is to spend most of your time looking at the new language with only occasional glances at English to fill in big gaps of understanding.

Extensive reading helps directly build the language processing structure in your brain. Your brain is primarily spending its time on the new language. The goal of extensive reading is to spend the minimum amount of time thinking in English needed to catch the general meaning.

Note that extensive reading becomes easier the more you practice it. At first, you will often need to refer to the English text to catch the meaning. However, as weeks go by, you will find more and more of the new language is simply familiar. Your understanding will be improving.

Note that extensive reading can be over new material or it can be repeated exposure to the same material such as re-reading the same book or chapter until it becomes more familiar. At first, repeated reading will probably be most helpful. As your skills improve, spending more time on new material will be more helpful. You need to adapt to what is working.

## **Targeted Reading**

Author's Note: I stumbled upon this method a number of years ago by accident. I started calling it targeted reading. I'm sure others have used similar methods but I've not heard it discussed much nor heard a common name for it.

Partway between extensive reading and intensive reading is targeted reading. Targeted reading is extensive reading with a bit of intensive reading thrown in to reduce the biggest problems.

My experience with extensive reading is that over time it gave me great gains in comprehension and familiarity with a language. However, I started to hit a plateau and I stopped improving. There were certain things that I kept stumbling over. In ancient Greek, I found there were certain verb endings I kept stumbling over. I decided to extensively read, except to stop at each verb ending I had trouble with. I'd then look carefully to make sure I'd understand it and then go back to extensive reading. I found that within a few days

that these were no longer a problem. I then moved my focus to the next biggest stumbling block.

I found that this is an effective way of improving extensive reading skills. It targets the biggest hurdle you have in reading and reduces it. Once that is no longer a big hurdle, you attack the next biggest hurdle. It is not about perfect mastery of each particular point, but just reducing it so it is not as big a problem as it was.

Rather than spending your efforts focusing on many topics equally, targeted reading puts your effort onto the things that most improve your extensive reading skills.

### **Finding the Balance**

You need to find a good balance between intensive, extensive, and targeted reading. This will vary at different stages of progress.

I focus on where my mind is at with the three. At first, I want most of my attention to be on the new language. This means that extensive reading tends to be helpful. As the language becomes

more familiar, I need to focus on improving. This is where targeted and intensive reading help the most.

### **Multiple Passes on Paragraphs**

As I practiced extensive reading of ancient Greek, I found some genres much easier to read than others. Here is a method I found worked well when encountering some more difficult genres.

I would first read a paragraph with extensive reading not looking at the English translation. I would then do a targeted or more intensive read. I would constantly refer to the English translation to make sure I understood each sentence and word clearly. I'd then do a third pass extensively. This type of system of multiple passes worked well for some genres I had problems with.

### **Adapt Your Reading**

As you make progress and try to read different types of materials, you need to adapt your reading

style. Follow the prolific learning principles and do what is enjoyable and effective. If you hit a plateau, change what you are doing, If you start to have to force yourself to continue, change what you are doing.



# Chapter 10

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## Pronunciation

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Author's Note: Much of this chapter is built on some ideas I picked up from YouTube videos and articles by two well-known polyglots. Alexander Argüelles has a good discussion of accents in a few videos. Luca Lampariello has a good discussion of the importance of practicing complete phrases and sentences in a few videos and articles.

This is one area many language students struggle with. There are however a few basic ideas that make this much easier.

## **Dialects and Languages have a Relaxed Mouth Position**

Few people know that most dialects of languages have a relaxed mouth position. This is where we naturally relax the parts of our mouth to after we finish speaking a sentence. Our lips, tongue, jaw, and related muscles are used to relaxing into a certain position. We do this without thinking about it.

Think about how different various English accents sound. A part of this is because different relaxed mouth positions are used. For example, most southern accents in the US are pronounced from further back in the mouth with a lower jaw position. In contrast, some accents from the British isles are pronounced from the front of the mouth with a tighter and higher jaw position. Some languages in India have retroflex sounds (with the tongue curled upwards) and tones which have carried over into English pronunciation giving a rather distinctive pronunciation.

Most language students are unaware of this. They try to use the relaxed mouth position for their

native language when learning a new language. The result is their vowels never seem to sound right and some consonants are nearly impossible to pronounce. Adjusting your relaxed mouth position for the new language should improve your pronunciation.

### **Your Mouth Needs Exercise**

Your mouth, tongue, lips, and jaw are moved by a complicated system of muscles. Pronouncing a new language may require strengthening and exercising those muscles to achieve new types of motions. This takes physical exercise of practicing speaking the language using the new relaxed mouth position.

### **Sounds are Pronounced Together**

Sounds are not pronounced in isolation. They are pronounced together. The sounds before and after them affect them. This means you should practice

speaking sounds in the context of complete words and phrases.

In addition, most languages have natural tones and rhythms as various sounds are pronounced in sequence. In order to learn these, phrases and sentences need to be practiced as a unit. Many words simply sound different when pronounced with other words.

One of the best ways to practice pronunciation is to speak phrases and short sentences. You are practicing both the sounds as well as the rhythm and intonation of the new language.

## **Learning to Pronounce Spanish**

To be clear, my Spanish is at perhaps an intermediate level at best. However, I've had a few native speakers comment that my pronunciation is better than a typical English speaking American who is learning Spanish.

When I initially started learning Spanish, I spent much time speaking along with the first Assimil lessons (which are pronounced more slowly

than later lessons). I used the sound editing software Audacity so that I could loop phrases and speak along with them repeatedly. This was much like how I sing along with a song. I adjusted my voice to try to match what I was hearing. I did this for perhaps 30 to 45 minutes on many evenings for a month or so and then periodically after that.

As an aside, this was something I enjoyed doing at the time. I wasn't forcing myself to do it which meant I was relaxed. I'm not sure this would have worked as well if I had made it an unpleasant rote exercise I forced myself to do.

The first thing I noticed is that my mouth got sore for the first week or two. It was because I was exercising muscles in ways they don't usually work. As it turns out, this was laying a foundation for improvement. The muscles in my mouth were becoming more capable of producing Spanish sounds.

The second thing I noticed is that I gradually adopted a new relaxed position in my mouth. My tongue is higher than my natural English and further forward. My jaw is a bit higher and my lips are

pursed a bit more. As this happened, I found that my vowels naturally improved. By using a relaxed mouth position closer to native Spanish speakers, my vowel pronunciation naturally became more Spanish-like.

The one big surprise was the rolled R. I spent the better part of a month on and off trying to learn to do it. I read articles, watched YouTube videos, and searched online for pronouncing the rolled R. I hit a point where I gave up and decided to just substitute a single tap R. A few weeks after giving up, I was working on vowels. I was speaking along with an Assimil lesson (with a male speaker with a baritone voice similar to mine). He was pronouncing *por favor* very slowly with some roll in the final R. As I spoke along, I simply rolled an R without trying. I was shocked. It took some effort, but I was able to do it again. After another week or so, it became fairly easy to do.

In hindsight, two things led to this. First, all the practicing had strengthened muscles in my mouth so that I could pronounce Spanish sounds. Second, using a more Spanish-like relaxed mouth po-

sition put my tongue in position to easily roll the R. I still cannot roll an R from my native relaxed English position. I first have to move my mouth to a more Spanish-like relaxed position.

Having said all this, there's probably no mistaking me for not being a native English speaker. However, I've been able to improve my pronunciation to where it's better than many Spanish learners.

### **Practice with Purpose**

There is no substitute for practicing pronunciation. You need to exercise muscles in new ways. You will probably need to find a new relaxed mouth position. You should practice complete phrases and sentences to get the intonation and interactions of sounds between words down. Because of the amount of repetition needed, it's important to use methods you find enjoyable for this. You don't want to burn yourself out doing this.

As an anecdotal observation, most of us have the ability to sing along with groups. Even the

worst singer among us can usually get out something passible in a group singing the Happy Birthday Song. Speaking out loud simultaneously with a recording is similar. Repeatedly doing this allows us to adapt our pronunciation to more closely match the recording.

In order to improve pronunciation, it must become automatic. Spending time repeatedly speaking the same phrase along with a recording allows us to focus on the pronunciation. As it becomes comfortable and familiar, it will start to naturally shape our pronunciation when we are trying to speak and our mind is focused on using the right words.

These are things that can help improve pronunciation on our own. Guidance from a native speaker with experience in tutoring or teaching is probably necessary to really fine tune our pronunciation.



## Chapter 11

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# **Prolific Learning Principles and Language Learning**

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If you use methods which are enjoyable and effective for you, you will see good progress. If you use methods which are not enjoyable or not effective for you, you will not see good progress. It's that simple. That is what separates prolific learners from others. Successful language learners who can use several languages have found what is both enjoyable and effective for them.

I'm going to give you some guidelines as to what makes things enjoyable and effective. This

is a summary of the second volume of this series applied to language learning.

### **Positive Attitude is Essential**

It is well-known that our body chemistry is affected by how we feel. It is well-known that our ability to learn is tied to our body chemistry. Stress, frustration, fear, anger, and other such emotions mess up our brain's ability to learn. Being relaxed, content, and enjoying what we are doing maximizes our brain's ability to learn.

When you are frustrated and stressed while studying, do something about it. Don't continue to force yourself to keep going. Take a break. Figure out why you are stressed and do something about it. Many people have gotten used to stress and frustration while studying and think it is a normal part of learning. It is not.

Choose methods of learning that are enjoyable and satisfying. This allows your brain to work better. It leaves you enthused and eager to come back to language learning the next day.

## **Work with Your Brain**

I've already talked a lot about choosing the best methods for building the right brain structures. If I hadn't, this would be where I would discuss it as related to prolific learning.

As you learn, actual physical changes are occurring in your brain. Your brain can only handle so many changes at a time before it needs to rest. It is similar to working hard and getting sore muscles. At some point, your brain needs a break. Some signs of this are when your mind starts to badly wander and refuses to remember anything. As you become aware of how your brain works, you'll get an idea of how much effective time you can spend on an activity before your brain needs rest. At this point, you need to shift to another activity or do something else.

It is also important to realize your brain is an organ that works better when you are healthy. Getting enough sleep, exercise, and eating healthy all improve brain function. Exposure to fast paced

media has a detrimental effect on your ability to think as well.

Too many people are getting used to a fast stream of information that their brain cannot process. Our brain runs at a pace suited for the real world around us. Fast paced media in a virtual world overwhelms our brain to the point where it can no longer think fast enough to keep up. It starts to emotionally react to random emotionally laden images and headlines. Stop flooding your brain and slow down. This will not only help your language learning but it will lower your stress levels and help you be a more reflective and thoughtful person.

### **Adapt as Needed**

At each stage of progress, different methods will give different results. Some methods work best moving from unfamiliar to somewhat familiar. Other methods work best moving from familiar to mastery.

You need to avoid two extremes. Don't give up on a method too quickly. Don't stick with a method that is not working. As you practice learning, you will gain experience to tell the difference. You will start to know when a method needs more time and effort and when you need to use a new method.

### **You are Unique**

You will have different goals and interests from everyone else. The native language materials you like will be different than other people. The methods that are enjoyable for you will be different from others. You need to learn what works best for you and what direction you want to go.

### **Learn in Context**

This comes down to the brain structure you are building. When you learn things in context, your brain sees those things as part of a whole system.

When you memorize individual facts on a list, your brain sees them as isolated things.

Mastery of anything involves the connections between things, not just the things themselves. Learning in context lets your brain build the connections between things. Learning by memorizing lists does not let your brain build these connections between things.

### **Practice Skills**

For language learning, the main point is to be able to use the language. Your brain cannot build a structure to use a language unless you practice using it.

### **Progress is Natural Growth**

You cannot set deadlines on your progress. Your brain builds a language structure at the pace it builds it. You can create an environment to help your brain do this. Trying to force yourself to learn faster through boring hard work only raises stress

levels. You need to learn what your brain needs to best learn.

Your brain is a learning marvel that adapts to the world around you. The sense of familiarity you have with things is what learning feels like. That process where something moves from unfamiliar to familiar is how learning occurs. Language learning will feel like that. Certain words, phrases, and so on will just seem more and more familiar over time.

## **Pursue Mastery**

What is the difference between a child's crayon drawing on a refrigerator and a painting hanging in the Louvre? What is the difference between a national symphony orchestra and a local high school band? That is what quality and mastery is. It is a sense that something is more accomplished or mastered than another. It's hard to describe and nearly impossible to measure, but we know it when we see it. It is something that comes from daily improvement over the course of years.

In language learning, quality and mastery comes from daily progress and improvement. Not making grammatical mistakes is a result of progress. Knowing many words is a result of progress. Speaking smoothly is a result of progress.

Do not make the mistake of pursuing fake mastery. Work at improving each day. Do things that make the language a little bit more familiar everyday. Mistakes will start to disappear. More skill and ability will appear. You will remember more and more words. True mastery is a natural result of building the right structure in your brain.



## Chapter 12

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# What About Formal Language Learning?

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Author's Note: This lengthy chapter takes a critical look at some limitations of our western education system. W. Edwards Deming's insightful works on quality, processes, and systems are applicable here. All systems give particular results which are inherent to the system. Some of the less than desirable outcomes we see in the U.S. education system are built into the system.

When many people think about learning a language, the first thing they think about is taking a class. The reality however is that many (probably most) people who take language classes emerge

with few skills. Some students develop many skills in language classes. However, many do not.

This is simply one more example of what is discussed in the first volumes of this series. We individually need to choose methods and materials that work best for us to maximize our learning. If methods are enjoyable and effective for us, we will grow and improve. If they are neither enjoyable nor effective for us, we will not improve.

By its very nature, formal curriculum based learning chooses particular methods and materials to use. This is done based on what works best for raising average test scores of groups of students. The extent these methods are enjoyable and effective for a particular student largely determines how an individual student will do.

The key question for you is if the time, effort, and money you put into a formal class would be worth it. There is a good chance you might see much better progress for a fraction of the time, effort, and money using other materials and methods. There is no doubt some students thrive in for-

mal courses, but there is no doubt that many do not.

## **What is Evidence-Based Formal Learning?**

Formal classes are usually built around a curriculum that sets a schedule, instructional methods, materials, and most other things. The success of curriculum based systems is measured by the average test scores of groups of students. New methods or materials are judged based on raising the average test scores of groups of students. This is generally referred to as evidence based learning. Someone has done studies proving particular methods or materials produce better average test scores (aka outcomes) for groups of students.

There is an inherent assumption here that few talk about. It is assumed that there is a best approach which has yet to be discovered. If only we can discover the perfect methods and materials, most students can become proficient in a new language. There is a further assumption that some-

one is always to blame if a student does not reach proficiency. That person might be the student (for being too lazy or lacking intelligence or motivation), or parents, or the teacher, or delinquent peers, or whomever. The question is rarely raised if the system itself of choosing one curriculum to use is responsible for much of what we see.

There is a second issue that is rarely raised. What type of brain structures are being built by students? And, which type of brain structures does the curriculum encourage? In theory, a language curriculum is about learning a new language. However, in practice, it may often mimic real mastery through much memorization alone. Recall the earlier discussion on the difference between a person who spends hours repeatedly reading a book in a new language versus one who spends hours memorizing vocabulary. Curriculum based testing is usually focused on outcomes such as how many words are remembered on quizzes and tests of various types. The memorizer will probably consistently score higher on weekly vocabulary quizzes than the reader who is build-

ing a lifetime language skill. A few years later, most memorizers will have forgotten most words whereas most readers will be moving on to more and more books.

The taboo question that is usually not allowed is if the curriculum itself ever fails many students. What if some students fail to reach proficiency because of the curriculum itself? My opinion is that by its very nature of choosing particular methods and setting the same deadlines for progress for all students, the system is determining winners and losers before students ever step into the classroom.

From the prolific learning outlook, the results we commonly see in formal learning are obvious. The chosen methods and materials will work well for some students and not others. Some will find them enjoyable and effective. Most will not. No matter what set of methods or materials are chosen for the perfect curriculum, they won't work well for some students. It is not the student's fault. It is the fault of the system.

Individual conscientious teachers often outperform the curriculum by allowing and encour-

aging new methods and materials for individual students. However, they ultimately are locked into a system which forces them to follow particular deadlines and meet particular testing outcomes. They are treading at the borders of individualistic prolific learning for all students, but are prevented by the system from doing that.

### **Will a Formal Class Work For You?**

I think this should be looked at from the perspective of what will happen in your brain. Will taking a class help build a structure that processes the language? Or will it help build a structure that analyzes a language? Will most of your time be spent being exposed to the language? Or will most of your time be spent meeting deadlines and memorizing material to get satisfactory grades?

The real question is if the time, effort, and money you spend on a formal class is worth it for the progress you will see. Classes work for some but not others.

Another aspect to consider is if the course will set you up to be an independent language learner for life. Will you learn how to choose among materials and learn to use them to improve your skills? Or will you work from a particular textbook and curriculum at a particular pace doing particular activities? Will the class help you develop the skills you want to develop?

## Chapter 13

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# **You are Responsible For Your Language Learning**

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Reading through the blogs, videos, and articles of many language learners, I found some patterns. The first lead to my research in prolific learning. The methods used by successful language learners are enjoyable and effective for them. The second pattern I saw was that successful language learners took responsibility for their own learning. They worked at learning how to learn languages. They experimented and found what was enjoyable and effective for them.



For many, it is somewhat scary to step out on their own and make educational decisions. It's much easier to sit back and let someone tell them what to do. However, unless a highly experienced teacher or tutor is working with you on an individual basis to choose methods and materials that are enjoyable and effective for you, you are likely to be given methods and materials that don't work very well for you. Look at the huge numbers of people who start lessons and classes in many things and then drop out. Some of this is of course due to lack of interest, but much is likely due to not being given enjoyable and effective methods to learn from.

You need to be willing to experiment with different materials and methods. You won't get it perfect the first time. Learning a language is itself a skill that needs to be learned and practiced. Read blogs, books, articles, and watch videos by other language learners to get ideas of new things to try. My hope is that this book can save you some wasted effort.

## Chapter 14

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### Resources

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I will point out some basic resources I've found as I've done internet research. As my prolific-learning.com web site develops, I will eventually have some articles or pages about language learning with links to particular sites and articles.

I noticed a big divide in language learning resources I found. I would split them into three general groups, academic research, education, and independent language learners.

## **Academic Research**

There are researchers at universities who study language acquisition, linguistics, brain function, and similar topics. Some research is so tightly focused it is of little general use. However, some research is broadly applicable to not only language learning, but learning in general.

One thing to consider is the purpose of the research. I found that some research is into human learning in general whereas other research into education is often about improving average test scores of groups. I've personally found research about general brain function and learning of much more use than what improves test scores.

## **Education**

If you do a web search for learning materials for a particular language, most hits will be to a site of this type. These materials usually reflect our curriculum based western education system and its typical results. There tends to be an underlying

view that successful language acquisition requires many years of hard work in language classes to eventually develop good skills. Many of these resources are about how to get students to stick with it and how to get better grades.

Some of these materials are about truly improving lifelong language skills. I do sense in some of these materials the tension I felt when I first started discovering prolific learning. That is the tension between becoming a successful language learner but being restricted to using only the methods, schedules, and requirements of the established industry practice curriculum that everyone uses and recommends.

There are some good resources in this group. However, note that much supports only a limited set of methods in common use. Many are based on memorization of lists and tables rather than exposure to the language.

## **Independent Language Learners**

The focus in these resources tends to be learning how to learn a new language. Many contributors of resources in blogs, videos, and forum posts are interested in learning multiple languages. Many have strong skills in a handful of languages themselves. There is an underlying view that anyone is capable of learning multiple languages. They merely need to learn how to learn.

This is an eclectic group of self-taught language learners, academics, teachers, and students who experiment with a variety of methods. They share their experiences with others. They look to helpful advice or insights from anyone, be they academics, formal educators, or self-taught learners. I have found that this group is among the most innovative with regard to language learning methods. There is an online community of internet polyglots (those who can use several languages) who interact in various ways. A few years ago, some started international polyglot conven-

tions which have attracted a number of speakers from this online community and academia.

You need to look at these resources carefully before just using them. Much of what these people write reflects what has worked for them as individuals. Some of this will work well for others and some will not.

## **My Summary of Resources**

This book is an attempt to distill my years of reading many of these resources into one place. I've tried to pull out the main principles that explain what works and what does not. It was reading these resources that put me onto the trail of prolific learning in the first place.

One of my big regrets is that I did not keep good notes over the years. My original intent was just to be a better language learner. It wasn't until years later that the prolific learning ideas really took root. It was a combination of these language resources, my formal education training, teaching experience, my science background, and experi-

ence in industry and non-profits analyzing processes that lead to this way of thinking I'm calling prolific learning. It also clarified my thinking as to the basic concepts underlying successful language learning. This book is my attempt to put what I've learned into a simple form.

This book is part of a home-made gift I am creating for my grandkids. I wish to leave them a legacy of learning. It's what I wish I'd have known my entire life. The website **prolific-learning.com** is my workshop so to speak. I want it to be like the real workshops where many grandkids spend enjoyable hours puttering and learning from their grandpas. I decided to share this with other families. It's where I'll be putting various things as I work on them. It will have free resources, videos, and information available.

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