

## 6 Secrets for Successfully Learning a Language

*"I'm too old to learn another language."*

*"The only time to learn is when you are young."*

**- Think again!**

We have all heard these sort of comments and even wondered if they are true. However, have you heard anyone say that you are too old, or not suited, to learn to cook or play cards? I will not pretend that learning to speak another language doesn't require some effort and persistence – and that is true for any new skill.

### What are the best ways to learn a language?

- The ideal is to go and live in the country amongst native speakers (away from anyone who speaks your language) for a year.
- Probably the next best is to fall in love with someone who only speaks the language.

For most people neither of these is an option! So how can we do it?

The obvious starting point is to get some input. There are some great online or cd based courses out there which suit many people. Or find yourself a really good tutor for small group lessons or 1:1 coaching. For most people the encouragement and discipline of a tutor-led approach ensures the greatest progress.

## 6 Secrets for Success:

### 1. Know why you're doing it

You have started to learn because it is something you have always wanted to do. It is a lovely language and perhaps you have family or friends that you want to be able to converse with. OK, but what do you really want to be able to do?

The first secret is to build a clear and tangible idea of the end result that you want. Imagine that you have succeeded in learning. What are you now able to do? What situation(s) are you now using the language in? Who are you are you enjoying talking with? What books or magazines are you enjoying reading? How many acquaintances have become new friends? How is it helping you in your work too?

Spend some time dreaming about the goal you want to achieve. Fix it in your mind however you like, perhaps tell someone about it, perhaps write it down, and perhaps feel what it is like to be so good at the language.

It doesn't matter if your goal seems far out of reach at the moment. The next step is to think about a clear short term goal. You may even set up a number of these specific goals.

A clear feeling and understanding of your reason for learning will focus your activity and give you the essential motivation to put in the work.

### 2. Speak the language from day one

If you plan to use your language with human beings – not just for exams – then put aside perfectionism. Grammar does NOT help you to speak a language – it helps you improve your language skills – and your tutor will introduce the grammar you need as you go along. You MUST make mistakes and lots of them. (Even native speakers make mistakes but no one worries). Embrace this and you will learn quicker and get your point across more efficiently. When you are ready for it you can go back to tidying up the grammar.

Speak from day one. No more waiting until you are perfect. People are always over-preparing and waiting for the day when maybe they will be ready. This is false logic – there will always be something missing, you'll never be 100% prepared. So start to speak right now – even if you have only learned a few words and phrases. It will be hard to begin with but you'll progress much faster.

Remember that pressure puts the lid on your thinking. So take your time, relax (even breathe!) and work out what you want to say – people will not mind waiting because they know how hard it can be and they will not think that you are stupid just because you take time.

### 3. Immerse yourself

Surround yourself with the sounds of the language as much as you can. Have the radio or CD on in the car or house. The background “noise” will gradually sort itself out and you will gradually hear the patterns and rhythms of the language. There is no need to concentrate on understanding everything from the beginning, just listen out for words and phrases that you recognise. Again gradually your mind will recognise more and more – and you will be able to guess at the meaning.

Talk to yourself. No one will mind and you won’t feel silly if you stumble or get it wrong. Use the silent self-talk that everyone has as a context to practice your growing language skills. Notice that you have little dialogues in your head – for example when you get up in the morning you may think to yourself “What time is it? Quick, I’ve got to get a shower then some breakfast and to the meeting at 9.00.” (Or something similar!) Why not say it in your new language? As you gradually increase the number of occasions during the day when you have these silent monologues you will find yourself gaining confidence and fluency. You will also notice gaps in your language which can prompt you to look up a new phrase or correct an old one.

Also try to sing the language to yourself. We remember much more when it is attached to music.

### 4. Repetition

Our brains are efficient machines, and they rapidly discard information that doesn’t seem useful. Chances are that you don’t remember what you had for dinner on Monday two weeks ago, because this information is not usually useful. If you went to a fantastic restaurant that day and spent the last two weeks telling people about how great it was, however, you’re likely to still remember in vivid detail.

The brain’s “use it or lose it” policy applies to everything we learn. If you spend an afternoon memorizing some phrases, and then don’t think about that material for two weeks, you’ll probably have forgotten most of it. In fact, studies show we forget about 75% of material learnt within a 48 hour period. The solution is simple, however: *review*. By reviewing newly-learnt information, we can greatly reduce forgetting.

Do some EVERY day. Even 5 or 10 minutes reviewing material will make a difference. Take advantage of the brain’s ability to learn by Spaced Repetition. Some items you will find it easier to recall and so these get reviewed less frequently. Use flash cards (preferably with pictures) to help you acquire vocabulary. Programs like Anki ([www.ankisrs.net](http://www.ankisrs.net)) can be used to create your own set of flash cards – and provide the spaced repetition reviews that you need.

## 5. Don't think it, just do it

One of the major blockages for someone learning a language is confidence. They dwell on the many ways things can go wrong, and remind themselves how stupid they are. Clear your head and just open your mouth. You are exaggerating how badly things will go – just let the language flow. President Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, said "*Confidence comes not from always being right but from not fearing to be wrong*". Remember that mistakes don't matter. Locals appreciate that you are trying to communicate in their language. Sometimes your mistakes will create an amusing incident that will embed some learning for ever. For example, a young lady I know confused Pariser (condom) for Berliner (doughnut) in a German cake shop. The puzzled expression turned to mirth as it became clear – and two words are now firmly registered in memory!

## 6. Be curious and have fun

If you are learning a language you are also opening up to a different way of thinking and behaving. Be curious about how people think and live. Why do they say it like that? What is the name of that food? How do you greet different sorts of people and what are the cultural norms in different situations? How do their opinions differ from yours – and what makes these valid for them?

Remember that you are aiming to communicate with another human being in an entirely different language. That is what it is for! You can't go wrong with this – it is not like in school where a certain number of errors earns you a fail. You are simply explaining your thoughts, asking questions and enjoying this wonderful new way to communicate. Remember by simply saying the words, you *are* communicating in that language, and what's more with an ever wider range of people.

There will be many challenges but you can find a way round them. Enjoy the learning and savour the results.