

Learning a New Language - One Bite at a Time

Learning a new language can seem daunting at first, especially if you have never tried it before. Don't despair, you have a proven track record. You CAN do it! You learned to speak English, didn't you? Learning a new language can be just as successful, and even more fun!

It is true that learning to communicate in a new way will take some work, and it is certainly no small undertaking. Neither is eating an elephant. But they are both accomplished in a similar manner: One bite at a time.

Therefore, two points will help greatly when trying to eat your foreign language elephant: **Patience** and **Consistency**

Patience. You didn't learn English in a week or two. You won't learn to speak a new language fluently in that amount of time either. Be patient with yourself and enjoy the learning process.

Consistency. You learned to speak English by being exposed to it every day. You must do the same with your new language. By consistent exposure through a combination of books, tapes, native speakers, or even a learning buddy, you can make steady and solid progress. Exercising your language muscles on a daily basis will absolutely result in a sleek, buff language skill that will make your friends jealous. Guaranteed! That is, if you don't give up. Make it a goal to do SOMETHING everyday in your new language, no matter how small. Remember that consistency will pay much larger rewards than stop-and-start overloading will, and it will be a much more enjoyable ride along the way.

Okay, here are a few strategies to try. Not all of them work for everyone, or fit into everyone's schedule. So keep an open mind and try them all, then stick with the ones that work best for your learning style and circumstances.

1. **Vocabulary Lists** are one of the most common ways to increase your foreign language vocabulary arsenal. Most people will list the new words to be learned in a vertical list down the left side of a page, and list the English translations down the right side of the page. Then depending on how much time is available, this simple method can be followed:
 - a. Say each word in the left column out loud three times, then look at the English translation on the right. To avoid learning the words "in order," jump around when practicing.
 - b. Cover the left column, looking only at the English words, and try to recall the new language equivalents, saying them out loud. Again, mix up the

order in which you learn the words so that you commit them to memory individually and not in relation to one another.

- c. This same column method can be used to learn useful phrases.
2. **Flash cards** are another common and simple language learning tool, but don't underestimate their effectiveness! All you need are a stack of index cards, a pen or pencil and a bold marker. Flash cards are a very time-efficient and portable vocabulary learning aid.
 - a. Write in large letters, preferably with a bold marker, one new word to be learned on one side of an index card. Then flip it over and write in normal size, non-bold letters with a pen or pencil the English translation. Make as many cards as you please, having them handy whenever you encounter new words.
 - b. Practice saying each new word three times, out loud if possible. Then flip the card to see the English word. Once you have gone through the cards a few times, try to guess the English words, or visa versa. But be sure to say the new words out loud at least three times each. Also regularly mix up the cards so that you cannot guess the next word.
 - c. In time, when you have a little grammar and enough vocab words under your belt, try using each new word in a sentence in your new language, and say the sentence out loud. This is the same method we all had to use in fourth grade English class! Remember? It does help those new words to stick a little better in the brain.
 3. **Phrase book** - Finding a good phrase book in your new language will help you to feel like you are getting somewhere fast. It will also give you at least a little functionality if you will soon be in a situation where you should really be more fluent in your new language than you are. They are also helpful for when you don't have much time, since phrase books are usually small and portable. They offer useful information in bite size portions that can be read and digested during small pockets of "spare" time, for learning grammar, pronunciation and even helpful cultural information. Amazon.com usually has a good selection of handy phrase books available.
 4. **Anytime study** - So you say you want to learn a new language but don't have time to study? No problem! Even if you just used strategies #2 and #3 above, you'd find yourself chipping away at that elephant at a steady pace. By carrying **flash cards** and a good **phrase book** with you wherever you go, your learning time will take care of itself. Be alert to using little pockets of time that are otherwise wasted during your daily routine:
 - Waiting for a doctor's appointment
 - Sitting in traffic

- Traveling on public transportation
- Waiting in line at the bank, post office, or grocery store
- When placed on hold on the telephone
- Waiting for a slow Web site to load

5. **Cassette tapes** are another great learning tool when time is tight. Though they are generally a more passive way to learn, they still provide exposure to your new language. In addition to the above list, you can listen to tapes while driving in your car, exercising at the gym, doing housework, or walking the dog. Everyone has enough time to learn a new language! What is more important is the strong desire to do so.

Here are a few suggestions for obtaining language learning cassette tapes:

- Make your own!** Record yourself saying your vocabulary words or phrases from your flash cards. It may not be as good as a native speaker and you may hear room for improvement that you did not hear live, but the repetition will increase your exposure. Compare your pronunciation to those you hear on audio clips or have a native speaker correct you.
- Record news broadcasts from the Internet.** Many radio stations the world over broadcast through the Web, whether prerecorded or live. Making cassette or CD recordings of these professional native speakers to listen to in your car or while walking the dog is a great way to get additional exposure.
- Language learning programs** commercially available are not all created equal, but they are all worth looking into. Some will be no more than vocabulary words. Others are comprehensive audio learning programs. Depending on your wallet, these are highly recommended additions to your language learning library. The [Pimsleur](#) programs have a reputation of being the best.

6. **Speak up!** Participation is one of the best ways to make that new language stick. As already mentioned above, when learning new vocabulary words, it is important to say them out loud whenever possible; three times is even better. But how can you know if you are pronouncing the words correctly? You will need to find either a native speaker or a language learning program that includes audio. Try to find both.

Network within your circle of friends, family and acquaintances to find native speakers of your new language, if you don't already know someone. Visit an ethnic restaurant that specializes in cuisine from a country that speaks your desired language. There may be native employees with whom you can practice your new skills. They will be willing tutors and you'll have great fun in the process! Be generally alert to sniff out others who can already speak the language you are learning and practice, practice, practice!

7. **Use the Internet** The Internet has a wealth of free information available to language learners.

- E-mail** is a great way to get practice in your new language. Do you have a friend who is a native speaker of the language you are trying to master? Why not exchange friendly e-mail **ONLY** in the new language? Ask him/her to correct your grammar. Participation in e-mail will improve your vocabulary, grammar, and help you to learn the language as it is spoken everyday.
- E-mail groups** specifically for those learning your new language, such as are found on Yahoo groups, is another way to practice and exposure yourself to your new language. It is also a great way to network with other learners as well.
- Web sites** abound these days in every language imaginable. Many provide basic learning lessons, as well as many audio clips for correct pronunciation. You will probably find a decent online dictionary that will be very handy when composing those foreign language e-mails! There are also inexpensive online learning courses to be found on some Web sites.

To find Web sites to help you learn, employ search engines such as Yahoo, Google, Ask Jeeves, Lycos, and AltaVista. Use keywords that include the language you are trying to learn, as well as the words "learn" and "language". You'll be astounded on what you find!

Occasionally visiting a Web site written in your new language is also a great way to check in and see how you're skills are progressing. Can you figure out what it is all about? It is also a great source for new vocabulary words, so keep your blank flash cards handy!

8. **Plan your bites** so that you don't get distracted and go off track. Consistency is the key to making real progress, and getting into a routine is the vehicle that will keep you moving forward. That old worn-out saying does apply when it comes learning a new language: "If you fail to plan, plan to fail." Set aside even just 10 or 15 minutes a day, say with your morning coffee, to review your flash cards or read a little of your grammar book. It will keep you going even if you have no other occasion to practice during the day. It will also serve as a reminder so that you will stay alert for opportunities to practice and learn whenever the opportunity to do so presents itself. (And we already know there are many pockets of time when you can squeak a little study into your schedule - see #4 above!)

Additionally, regularly make appointments with yourself to devote to your language studies. Plan to share lunch with a native speaker once a month or so. Even plan a vacation to a place where your new language is spoken to create a deadline for yourself. Do whatever it takes to keep you learning on a regular and progressive basis!

9. **Learn like a child.** Children learn visually and by repetition. One often suggested method is to place sticky notes on objects throughout your home with their names in your new language written on them. Another idea is to cut out pictures from magazines and paste them onto your flash cards alongside the foreign language word so that you will associate them not only to the English translation but to the idea. This will also help you to think in your new language.

Just as a child who is first learning to speak uses the limited vocabulary he/she possesses, in your daily life, whenever you look at or think of an object, try to also think of and then say its equivalent in your new language.

10. **Grammar isn't everything.** Don't get too tangled up in learning all the rules of grammar. Children learn many rules of grammar and become relatively fluent speakers long before they open a grammar book. Remember that grammar is there to help you - not hold you back. If some grammatical rules don't make sense to you, don't worry about it. Imitate the way native speakers speak or write. You may end up learning many rules intuitively before you understand them logically. The point is to keep progressing.
11. **Brain overload** is when you hit your saturation point at any given moment. Don't force yourself to attempt to keep learning. Your absorption rate has maxed out so don't waste your time. Don't try to eat your language elephant all in one bite! Take a break and clear your mind. Do something totally different that has nothing to do with language learning for at least 10 minutes, or reschedule your learning session.