OpenLearn

How to learn a language

To practise languages anywhere...

@bryanMMathers

IMMERSE YOURSELF!

Thought: The Open University

Contents

Introduction and guidance

Introduction and guidance

This free course, *How to learn a language*, is for anyone thinking of learning a language. Whether it is the first time you are venturing into language learning, or if you have already started, this course will show you how to keep motivated, set your own goals, and develop strategies to learn a language. You will understand what is needed to succeed, and get lots of advice on how to develop the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. You will also find out how to learn vocabulary, and how to evaluate language learning resources. Finally, you will also learn how to create a 'virtual language immersion' for yourself.

The course lasts 8 weeks, with approximately 3 hours of study time each week. You can work through the course at your own pace, so if you have more time one week there is no problem with pushing on to complete another week's study. You can also take as long as you want to complete it.

After completing this course, you will be able to:

- understand your motivation for learning languages
- set realistic goals in language learning
- memorise vocabulary
- evaluate independent language learning resources for personal learning goals
- create a virtual immersion environment.

Moving around the course

In the 'Summary' at the end of each week, you can find a link to the next week. If at any time you want to return to the start of the course, click on 'Full course description'. From here you can navigate to any part of the course. Alternatively, use the week links at the top of every page of the course.

It's also good practice, if you access a link from within a course page (including links to the quizzes), to open it in a new window or tab. That way you can easily return to where you've come from without having to use the back button on your browser.

Who wrote this course?

This course has been written by three authors, who are all language teachers and learners.

Tita Beaven

Tita Beaven is a Senior Lecturer in Spanish at The Open University. Her research is in the area of innovative pedagogy and open education. Tita speaks Spanish, English, French and Italian. She is also currently learning German, and she has also already decided what three languages she's going to learn next! You can find out more about her teaching and research on Tita's OU Profile.

Olly Richards

Olly Richards is a polyglot who speaks eight languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Arabic and Cantonese) and is the founder of I Will Teach You A Language, a website that provides study hacks and mindtools for language learners.

Fernando Rosell-Aguilar

Fernando Rosell-Aguilar is a Senior Lecturer in Spanish at The Open University, and his research is in the area of online language teaching and learning. Fernando speaks Spanish and English, and some French and Italian. You can find out more by visiting Fernando's OU Profile.

Each author has written specific weeks of this course, and share with you their insights into how to learn a language as both expert teachers and learners of languages.

There are also videos from learners speaking about their language learning journey, and some comments from Laura, an OU languages graduate, who will also offer her reflections and advice.

What is a badged course?

While studying *How to learn a language* you have the option to work towards gaining a digital badge.

Badged courses are a key part of The Open University's mission *to promote the educational well-being of the community.* The courses also provide another way of helping you to progress from informal to formal learning.

To complete a course you need to be able to find about 24 hours of study time, over a period of about 8 weeks. However, it is possible to study them at any time, and at a pace to suit you.

Badged courses are all available on The Open University's OpenLearn website and do not cost anything to study. They differ from Open University courses because you do not receive support from a tutor. But you do get useful feedback from the interactive quizzes.

What is a badge?

Digital badges are a new way of demonstrating online that you have gained a skill. Schools, colleges and universities are working with employers and other organisations to develop open badges that help learners gain recognition for their skills, and support employers to identify the right candidate for a job.

Badges demonstrate your work and achievement on the course. You can share your achievement with friends, family and employers, and on social media. Badges are a great motivation, helping you to reach the end of the course. Gaining a badge often boosts

confidence in the skills and abilities that underpin successful study. So, completing this course should encourage you to think about taking other courses.

How to get a badge

Getting a badge is straightforward! Here's what you have to do:

- read each week of the course
- score 50% or more in the two badge quizzes in Week 4 and Week 8.

For all the quizzes, you can have three attempts at most of the questions (for true or false type questions you usually only get one attempt). If you get the answer right first time you will get more marks than for a correct answer the second or third time. If one of your answers is incorrect you will often receive helpful feedback and suggestions about how to work out the correct answer.

For the badge quizzes, if you're not successful in getting 50% the first time, after 24 hours you can attempt the whole quiz, and come back as many times as you like.

We hope that as many people as possible will gain an Open University badge – so you should see getting a badge as an opportunity to reflect on what you have learned rather than as a test.

If you need more guidance on getting a badge and what you can do with it, take a look at the OpenLearn FAQs. When you gain your badge you will receive an email to notify you and you will be able to view and manage all your badges in My OpenLearn within 24 hours of completing the criteria to gain a badge.

Get started with Week 1.

Week 1: Your motivation and goals

Introduction

This week of the course is written by Tita Beaven.

Figure 1 Tita Beaven, author of Week 1.

Welcome to Week 1 of this free badged course, *How to learn a language*.

This week you will think about your reasons and your goals for learning a language, and you'll explore what the possible barriers to you accomplishing your goals might be, and what you can do about it.

By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- visualise your 'future language self' and set SMART goals
- think about how realistic your aims are, map your journey and consider how long it will take
- understand possible barriers to your success, and how to deal with them.

1 Why learn a new language?

Lots of people say they would love to speak another language, but many people are put off, perhaps because they don't have very good memories of learning a language at school, or because they think it's too hard, or because, well, everybody speaks English anyway!

If you decide you want to learn a language, then the message in Figure 2 is probably the reason why.
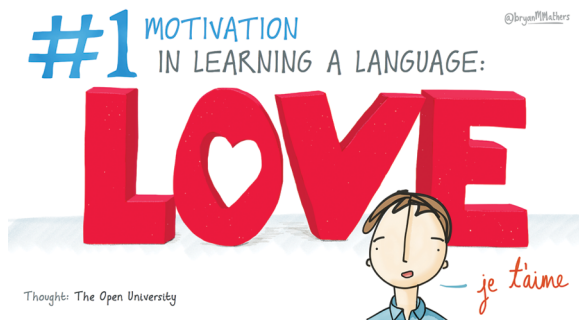
Figure 2 Motivation in learning a language

This doesn't necessarily mean that you have fallen in love with someone from another country (although that is a very common motivation for wanting to learn a language). One of your children or siblings might have fallen in love with someone from another country, and now you find yourself with a whole new extended family that you want to be able to communicate with – wanting to talk to their new grandchildren is a surprisingly frequent reason for older people wanting to learn a foreign language. You might have fallen in love with a place and visit there often, so you want to be able to communicate with the locals. Or you might have fallen in love with the way a language sounds – I have always loved the sound of Italian, and that was one of my reasons for wanting to learn the language.

On the other hand, you might be asking yourself if there are any bad reasons to learn a language. For instance, choosing one language over another because you think it is the easier choice, or feeling like you want to speak another language, but not really identifying with the people who speak it or their culture.

This is what Laura, a languages graduate at the OU, has to say about the matter. You will hear from Laura at various points throughout the course.

> ## Laura says:
>
> I believe the reason I got on with Spanish and German is because I had a real interest in the history and culture of German- and Spanish-speaking countries, and I also had German- and Spanish-speaking friends. Yet my efforts to learn French beyond the basics were ultimately a failure, because I never really had any deep interest to sustain my motivation; I basically thought that because I could speak Spanish, French was a 'logical' next step for me, but obviously that was the wrong motivation for me.

Now watch the following video, in which a group of people talk about why they want to learn another language.

Video content is not available in this format.

2 A marathon, not a sprint

Learning a language is a bit like running a marathon. You have to put in the time, the work and the effort. There is really no other way. If you have started this course thinking that you could just pick up a new language effortlessly or learn it in three weeks, you may be disappointed. Whether you're new to language learning or you have some experience from some time ago, learning a language will take commitment, time and regular practice. However, like running a marathon, it can be tremendously rewarding, and an achievement to be really proud of.

Figure 3 Learning a language is a marathon, not a sprint

3 What does success look like for you?

So, you have seen that language learning is a bit like running a marathon. And it is certainly a marathon, and not a sprint, in the sense that language proficiency will take time to achieve, especially if this is the first time you have set about learning a foreign language.

It is well known that, as well as the importance of their physical training, for athletes to succeed they also need to stay on top of their game mentally. One thing that athletes do to enhance their performance is to use visualisation techniques, imagining themselves completing a race, or stepping onto the podium.

As Angie LeVan of the Clinical Research Unit at the University of Pennsylvania Abramson Cancer Center explains:

> Mental imagery impacts many cognitive processes in the brain: motor control, attention, perception, planning, and memory. So the brain is getting trained for actual performance during visualization. It's been found that mental practices can enhance motivation, increase confidence and self-efficacy, improve motor performance, prime your brain for success, and increase states of flow – all relevant to achieving your best life!

(LeVan, 2009)

Visualisation techniques have also been shown to be important in language learning. According to Professor Zoltan Dörnyei, a leading researcher on motivation and language learning, 'a particularly effective way of motivating learners is to enable them to create an attractive vision of their future language self' (2013, p. 5).

According to Dörnyei, an effective way to enhance your motivation as a learner is to imagine yourself as you will be once you have achieved your goal, just like athletes do. He recommends visualising what success in learning the language you are studying looks like for you.

Figure 4 shows what success in learning German, the language I am currently studying, looks like for me.

Figure 4 Tita imagining her trip to Berlin

Box 1 Tita's ideal future German self

I have just started to learn German. I am planning to visit Berlin next year. I visited last year for a conference, and did not really speak any German then. I would like to return next year, and I can imagine myself arriving at the Hauptbahnhof, and stopping for a coffee on my way to the hotel. I imagine getting to the hotel, being greeted by the receptionist, and being able to ask for my room in German. I will also enjoy being able to speak German when I go back to the nice restaurant I went to in my last visit, and to order a beer at the terrace by the river. I will also be able to talk to people in the shops, rather than rely on English for everything. If I have time, I will also visit the Pergamon museum, which I didn't have time to visit last time, and I will get a German guide and try to read that, rather than an English one.

I can also imagine attending some of the conference talks in German, and talking to colleagues about the topic of the conference, which is language learning, in German. I will also see some of the people I met last year, and it will be great to chat to them in German about what they have been doing. I imagine speaking fairly fluently to people in the hotel, shops and restaurants. I think they will be pleased to see that I make the effort to speak in German, although some might reply in English (people always do that). I think my colleagues at the conference will be pleased that I have learned some German although they will also want to speak other languages.

Box 1 Tita's ideal future German self

4 Your 'future language self'

Now that you have an idea of what a portrait of a future language self might look like, it's time to do your own. In order to do this, you are going to do a visualisation exercise.

Activity 1 Visualising the future
Allow about 30 minutes

Find a nice, quiet place where you are not going to be disturbed or interrupted for ten to fifteen minutes, and get ready to do the visualisation exercise below. It's a good idea to sit comfortably in a quiet place, take a few deep breaths to relax yourself, and close your eyes as you listen to the visualisation audio (adapted from Hadfield and Dörnyei, 2013, pp. 35–7). You might be rather sceptical about this sort of exercise, but do give it a try.

> Audio content is not available in this format.

How did you find that? Did you manage to imagine yourself in the future speaking the language you are learning? Now spend some time writing up how you imagine your future language self, in the same sort of format as I provided for myself earlier. It is important that you do this now, as you will need to look back at your description of your future language self in the next activities. You will also find that this written record of how you imagine your future language self is a useful document to return to in the future, especially at times when you are struggling with your motivation.

Laura says:

I wish I had done this activity when I first started studying languages! I think doing something like this and (more importantly) having a written record of it that I could look back on when I was feeling demotivated would have been beneficial to me. I would also suggest that you repeat this exercise at regular intervals as you progress in your language learning, particularly when you start feeling demotivated.

5 Reality check

You might have found that when you wrote up your visualisation, there were aspects that sounded quite realistic and felt doable, and others that were probably a bit more unlikely. This is perfectly normal, and in the next activity you are going to try to separate your language-learning goals into those that are realistic and those that aren't.

If you remember my visualisation of my ideal future German self, these are some of the things I wanted to achieve within a year:

- ordering a coffee
- checking in at the hotel
- interacting with shop assistants
- ordering food in a restaurant
- ordering a beer
- visiting a museum and reading the museum guide in German
- attending some of the conference sessions in German
- talking to colleagues about the topic of the conference
- chatting to colleagues in German.

Which of these objectives do you think are realistic, and which are unrealistic?

Table 1 shows my own evaluation of my goals.

Table 1 Tita's evaluations of her goals

Goal	1= realistic, easy to achieve 2= possible but challenging 3= not realistic in the time available	Reasons
Ordering a coffee	1	Realistic. I can achieve this easily, as the language is quite formulaic and predictable.
Checking in at the hotel	1	Realistic. I can achieve this as long as there are no problems with the booking etc.
Interacting with shop assistants	1 or 2?	Realistic. I can achieve this easily at a very basic level, but it will depend on what I am buying (I might not have the vocabulary).
Ordering food in a restaurant	1	Realistic. I can achieve this easily as the language is quite formulaic and predictable.
Ordering a beer	1	Realistic. I can achieve this easily as the language is quite predictable.
Visiting a museum and reading the German guide	2	This might be challenging, but I should be able to use my general knowledge about art to make sense of some of it.

Attending some of the conference sessions in German	3	This will be very challenging. I don't think I will be able to follow the sessions in German and I would need a lot more time. Not a realistic goal right now.
Talking to colleagues about the topic of the conference	3	This will be very challenging, as I would need quite a lot of specialist vocabulary, and I don't think I can learn that in the time available. Not a realistic goal right now.
Chatting to colleagues in German	3	This will be challenging, but achievable provided we stay within topics I am familiar with and they are patient with me.

Activity 2 Reviewing your goals
Allow about 10 minutes

Now look back at your own visualisation of your future language self, and write a list of the goals you set for yourself in this table. Make sure you save the document somewhere where you can refer to it again, as you will return to it in Week 8. Then read through your goals, and decide which ones are realistic and easy to achieve, which ones are possible, but more challenging/more long term, which ones are not realistic. Also think of the reasons for your evaluation of your goals.

Now that you know which goals are more realistic, and which ones are less so, put an estimated timeframe of when you think you will achieve each one. As Laura says …

Laura says:

I think it is important that you consider the time frame you have available and how long it would realistically take you meet certain goals. Having a specific time-frame (e.g. like a trip to Berlin next year, like Tita) is of course helpful, but if not, it is useful to try to estimate long you think it would take you to get to such a stage. I realise that time frames are covered a little later on (I did look ahead!), but when I started learning Spanish, I didn't really have any specific time-frame to work towards, apart from my assignments, and I realise now how useful it would have been.

6 What are the barriers?

We all like to think that we are going to succeed in achieving our goals, but as anyone who has set themselves a New Year's resolution probably knows, failure is also an option.

This might come as a surprise to you to talk about failure, as so much current thinking is about embracing a 'can do' attitude and thinking that everything is possible, and that the sky's the limit.

You might indeed think it is strange that we would talk about failing in a course that is designed to help you succeed in language learning, but in our experience, there are always lots of things that get in the way of a good plan, ranging from lack of confidence to lack of time, other pressures on your day to day life, an unexpected personal circumstance, a habit of procrastinating, or simply not knowing how to deal with difficulties in your language learning journey.

> ## Laura says:
>
> I think it is important to understand that changes in life circumstance doesn't necessarily mean you have failed – it may well mean you have to take a step back, re-evaluate your motivations, goals, routine etc. and accept you haven't managed to achieve everything you wanted within the timeframe you envisaged.

There are lots of reasons why people come unstuck when learning languages. Here are some barriers that people have. Do you identify with any of them?

- I lack confidence
- I am easily distracted
- I think I'm just not very efficient
- I am easily discouraged
- I always procrastinate
- I am lazy
- I have no willpower
- I am really over-committed to too much stuff
- I get easily stressed
- I am very disorganised.

> ## Activity 3 Identifying barriers
> Allow about 5 minutes
>
> Here are some of the unsuccessful behaviours that people can exhibit when learning a language.
>
> For each of the behaviours below, decide which barrier best describes the situation
>
> 'I am not very confident, and I am really scared of speaking and making mistakes. I'm not very good at languages, and I'm not sure if I can do this…'
>
> ○ He lacks confidence
> ○ He is very disorganised

o He has no willpower

'I know what I'm supposed to do to learn a language, but I just seem to find so many reasons to put off learning new vocabulary or studying grammar… and if I have a test, I can revise for it at the last minute!'

o She is lazy

o She always procrastinates

o She is really over-committed to too much stuff

'I just don't like working hard… Life is about having fun and being happy, right? And studying a language is just such hard work!'

o She is lazy

o She gets easily stressed

o She thinks she's just not very efficient

'I know I should practice speaking and study grammar, but it's just so much easier to play with this really cool app I found. I know it's silly, because I'm not making any progress, but I just can't find the determination to work hard.'

o He lacks confidence

o He has no willpower

o He is easily discouraged

'I have all these books, and audio, and films, and apps… I start working on something, and then I give up and try something else. I can't focus on anything for more than a few minutes.'

o She is easily discouraged

o She always procrastinates

o She is easily distracted

Activity 4 Reflecting on your own barriers
Allow about 10 minutes

Now think of three of the barriers that you most identify with and write a couple of sentences for each explaining how they affect your language learning.

Discussion

For instance, I am quite given to procrastination. I will settle down to study German and find that first I check my Facebook page or my Twitter account, then I might go and get myself a drink, and finally settle down to work. What this usually means is that I've wasted a lot of time before I settle down to study and usually run out of time to do the studying itself! I also know that if I have a lesson, I will leave doing the homework or preparation to the last possible minute.

7 Overcoming obstacles

It would be unrealistic to think that you will sail through your language-learning journey without ever encountering any obstacle or any of the barriers we've talked about. What is important is to be prepared so that you can recognise these barriers and overcome them.

Here is a mindmap of strategies to deal with obstacles you might encounter.

Figure 5 Mindmap (adapted from Hadfield and Dörnyei, 2013, p. 70)

Activity 5 Deciding on strategies to overcome obstacles
Allow about 5 minutes

Read the following situations, and decide which strategy is being used in each case:

'To learn vocabulary, I walk around my house naming the rooms, the furniture and the objects in my home in my foreign language.'

○ Promise yourself a reward.

○ Make use of your environment.

'I used to get to the end of the day and realised I hadn't done any language studying, so now I get up 15 minutes earlier and make sure I start every day with 15 minutes of language learning. I do this Monday to Friday. At the weekend, I spend one hour after breakfast.'

○ Develop a routine.

○ Studying my language.

'When I have done what I set out to achieve in a particular week, I treat myself to something nice.'

○ Promise yourself a reward.

○ Break the task down.

'I love music, so I find songs in my target language and sing along to them.'

○ Make it fun.

○ Develop a routine.

'Because I get distracted easily and I tend to procrastinate, I close my email and my social media apps before I start studying. Unless I'm specifically using a language-

learning app, I put my smartphone out of sight! I only allow myself to look at my email and social media after I have finished my study session.'

○ Make rules.

○ Make it fun.

'When I sit down to study, I break the session into three parts. First I spend a few minutes reviewing what I did in my last session, then I work on one main task (such as reading a text, listening to a longer piece of audio, or working on my grammar). This takes up most of the study session. Then I like to finish the session by doing something fun, such as revising some vocabulary, or watching a short video.'

○ Break the task down.

○ Make use of your environment.

'Before I start my study session, I think of what I will have achieved at the end. This helps me to stay motivated.'

○ Visualise a goal.

○ Promise yourself a reward.

Activity 6 Thinking about your own obstacles and strategies
Allow about 30 minutes

Now think of what issues you are likely to face when learning your language, and what strategies you might use to deal with each situation.

You might want to print out the mindmap in Figure 5 and write your ideas on it.

Try to think of a situation for each type of strategy, and write them down.

8 Mapping your journey

So far, you have visualised yourself in the future speaking the language you are studying and you have articulated specific aims. These are key elements that will help your motivation. You then considered how realistic those aims were, thought of the obstacles that might prevent you from achieving your aims and the strategies you can adopt to overcome those obstacles. The next step is to map your journey. One useful 'map' you can use is the CEFR descriptors.

The CEFR (or Council of Europe Framework of Reference for Languages, as it is called in full) is a document produced by the Council of Europe that defines six levels of language proficiency: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, C1 and C2. The A levels indicate basic proficiency, the B levels describe independent users, and the C levels correspond to a proficient user.

Laura says:

I often use the CEFR descriptors to refer back to in my language learning. It is a wordy document but, to be honest, every serious language learner who wants to progress beyond tourist-speak should be familiar with it.

The six proficiency levels can be summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Common reference levels, global scale

Basic user	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.
	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
Independent user	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

Proficient user	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.

Here's the table as a word document. You might want to download it and save it for future reference.

You will notice that at the lower levels, the learner has to be able to communicate in familiar, everyday settings and routine context. As a learner moves up the scale and becomes more proficient, they also become more able to communicate in a variety of contexts, so that at level C they can communicate in a wide variety of social, academic and professional contexts.

When we looked at my description of my ideal future German self, most of the aims that I felt were realistic were the ones that correspond to levels A1 and A2 (ordering a coffee, checking in at the hotel, ordering food and drink, etc.). We also saw how some of my aims were not very realistic, or would require more time (reading the guide in German when I visited a museum; attending some of the conference sessions in German, talking to colleagues about the topic of the conference). In order to accomplish these aims, I would need to develop the sort of language that goes beyond everyday contexts, and I would need to be operating at the level of 'independent user'.

Activity 7 Mapping your ideal future self to CEFR levels
Allow about 10 minutes

So what about you? Have another look at the aims you identified for your ideal future self in your language and try to map them against one of the different CEFR levels.

Discussion

If you are a beginner, your aims will probably match the levels A1 or perhaps even A2 of the CEFR document. As we will discuss later, it is important that your aims are realistic for the time you have available, so don't feel you have to aim for full proficiency when you start off on you journey. You might want to aim to lower levels in the first instance, and then revise your goals when you reach the different milestones of the various CEFR levels.

Laura says:

I remember doing this exercise when I had been learning Spanish for a couple of years and realising that a lot of my goals were on the C-Level! It was useful to do that, as it gave me a more realistic view of my goals and meant I wasn't so discouraged that I couldn't read Cervantes in my second year of Spanish!

The other thing that I have learned is that although there are different aspects to language learning (listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation),

sometimes I have wanted to prioritise some of those over others. So for instance, while in my undergraduate degree I worked on all of them, more recently, for my work, I have had to learn to read some Romanian and Albanian, but I haven't necessarily needed to be able to speak or listen to it, or actively use it). However, don't prioritise some aspects over others just because they are easier (e.g. reading over speaking)!

9 Your goals

So far, you have visualised your future language self, and thought about the sorts of things you imagine yourself doing in the language you are learning. Some of those might be slightly unrealistic goals in the time you have available but, having looked at the CEFR levels, you should now have a clearer idea of what you want to achieve. So let's now focus on setting goals.

As the career development website MindTools explains, goal setting has been shown to be an important aspect in business, sports, and many other fields too.

Why set goals?

Top-level athletes, successful business people and achievers in all fields set goals. Setting goals gives you long-term vision and short-term motivation. It focuses your acquisition of knowledge and helps you to organise your time and your resources so that you can make the very most of your life.

By setting sharp, clearly defined goals, you can measure and take pride in the achievement of those goals, and you'll see forward progress in what might previously have seemed a long, pointless grind. You will also raise your self-confidence, as you recognise your own ability and competence in achieving the goals that you've set.

(MindTools, n.d.)

One way of setting yourself useful goals is to use the SMART framework. Read the short article about how to set SMART goals for language learning by Agnieszka Murdoch, language coach and author of the 5 Minute Language website (there is a longer version of this article on the website).

Activity 8 Matching objectives to the type of SMART goal
Allow about 5 minutes

Match each objective with the type of SMART goal.

Set 1: learning the past simple

   Specific

   Measurable

   Time-bound

Match each of the items above to an item below.

   Understand when to use the past simple

   Understand the four most common uses of the past simple

   Memorise the conjugation of the six most common verbs in my language in the present by the end of next week

Set 2: learning to ask for and give advice

   Specific

   Measurable

Time-bound

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Learn phrases to ask for and give advice

Learn ten phrases to ask for and give advice

Learn ten phrases that can be used to ask for and give advice by the end of this week

Next, you'll think about your own goals.

Activity 9 Goal setting
Allow about 30 minutes

If you have already started learning a language, you might have very clear goals in mind, and be able to set your goals now.

You can use this template to set your goals.

If you are new to language learning, you might want to work through the rest of the course before setting your language-learning goals. Regardless of what you do, you should review, update and refine the goals you set yourself as a language learner regularly, so you will revisit this section again in Weeks 4 and 8 of the course.

It is important that you review your goals regularly, and reflect on whether you have achieved them or not. If you are new to language learning, you might find you are setting yourself SMART goals that are a bit too unrealistic.

Laura says:

I think it is useful to go back to your goals every few weeks and assess whether they were realistic, whether you have fulfilled them, and if not, why not. It is important to evaluate your goals regularly. As a student new language learning, it is likely that you will make some mistakes in setting goals initially, particularly with regard to what is realistic – I know I did! So get into the habit of reviewing and re-evaluating your goals according to the SMART framework regularly.

10 How long will it take?

Figure 6 Can you learn a language in three weeks?

Watch the following video, in which a group of people talk about how long they think it will take to learn a language.

Video content is not available in this format.

How long it takes you to learn a language depends on several factors:

- the level of proficiency you want to get to
- whether you are an experienced language learner or not
- the intensity, regularity and efficacy of your study routine
- how similar the language you are learning is to the language(s) you already speak
- how complex your target language is.

If you are a native speaker of English, you might find it easier to learn German, as they are both Germanic languages that share a lot of vocabulary and phonological features, than to learn Mandarin, where you would have to get to grips with a different writing system and

with the fact that Mandarin is a tonal language, and where there are no similarities with English in the vocabulary, grammar or syntax.

There are many estimates of how long it may take a learner to reach each of the CEFR levels, but as a guideline, it might take you a couple of hundred hours to move between each of the six levels. As I've already said, learning a language is a marathon, not a sprint. So… beware of snake oil!

11 This week's quiz

Well done – you have reached the end of Week 1 and can now take the weekly quiz to test your understanding.

Week 1 practice quiz

Open the quiz in a new tab or window (by holding ctrl [or cmd on a Mac] when you click the link) and come back here when you are done.

12 Summary of Week 1

This week you have looked at your motivation, some of the barriers you might come across when learning a language, and strategies to deal with them. You might have started setting yourself some SMART goals, using the CEFR as a map.

You should now be able to:

- visualise your 'future language self' and set SMART goals
- think about how realistic your aims are, map your journey and consider how long it will take
- understand possible barriers to your success and how to deal with them.

Before you go any further, reflect on the following: what does learning a language actually involve?

Next week, Olly will talk you though this question, drawing on his experience of learning languages.

You can now go to Week 2.

Week 2: What is language learning about?

Introduction

This week of the course is written by Olly Richards.

Figure 1 Olly Richards, author of Week 2.

Becoming a successful language learner is not simply about discovering the 'how-to' tips and tricks. Every language is a bit like a puzzle. Over time, you gradually increase your understanding of how a language works. Grammar that was once hard becomes second nature. Vocabulary that used to slip your mind becomes engrained.

The process of becoming fluent in a language can take many years and success comes with time, providing you are able to stick at it.

For a new language learner, though, it is sticking with a language over a long period of time that is often the hardest thing of all. This is not because they are unwilling to do the work. It's because unexpected things happen.

By the end of this week, you will be able to:

- revisit your language learning aims
- recognise four important areas that you need to master: the linguistic, the cultural, the methodological and the self.

1 Challenges you may face

Take a look at this video describing some challenges in learning a language over time.

Video content is not available in this format.

All these experiences are a normal part of learning a language. However, when you encounter them for the first time, they can be difficult to deal with.

For example, difficult grammar can often only be mastered not through memorising rules, but by an ongoing process of attention, exposure, experimentation and so on. Otherwise intelligent people can be left exasperated by a problem that can't be solved through brainpower and hard work alone. How do you react to challenges that can't easily be quantified and controlled?

2 'My goal is to speak fluently!'

Many people are keen to start speaking their new language with native speakers. However, when they try to do so, perhaps after building up courage for some time, everyone tends to reply in English, leaving them feeling dejected and losing motivation. How do you recover from this?

The journey of learning a foreign language can be a rollercoaster and it's rarely for the reasons you expect.

Your second foreign language is easier, though. And your third easier still.

In my experience of going through the language learning process almost ten times, what I've learned is that success comes in large part from knowing what to expect, picking your battles and, critically, knowing what you want to achieve with the language.

For example, take our earlier example of learning complex grammar. If your goal is simply to travel around Italy and order food in restaurants, do you really need to master the *trapassato prossimo* (the past perfect)? Knowing that you don't actually need to know this verb tense for your purposes can save you months of headaches.

Now let's take the case of the native speakers who insist on replying to you in English. How necessary is it for you to keep torturing yourself if, in fact, your original aim was simply to be able to read academic papers for your research?

You touched on this in Week 1 when you learned about motivation and expectations. At this stage, you may be beginning to see how these decisions might impact on the task of learning your target language in a practical sense.

This week, you'll be looking at many of these reasons, in order to prepare yourself for what may be to come.

The title of this section is 'My goal is to speak fluently!', because that's what most people tell themselves without digging much deeper. However, in Week 1, you thought in some depth about your language learning aims.

Let's take a second right now to revisit those.

What does it mean to learn a language? That depends very much on what you want to learn.

Activity 1 Revisiting your language learning aims
Allow about 15 minutes

Answer the following questions. As you're thinking about them, consider how proficient or fluent you would need to be in the language in order to get the job done:

- Who do you want to speak with?
- What do you need to talk to them about?
- What kind of places will you be in?

Here is an example: 'I'm learning Spanish for my trip to Mexico in the summer. It's still 6 months away, so I'm sure that's enough time to learn to speak a bit! I don't really have any ambitions to speak fluently, after all I'll only be there for a couple of weeks. But I'd really like to be able to chat with the locals when I'm there, just saying a few words to avoid being a clueless tourist. Shopkeepers, taxi drivers, that kind of thing. It would be nice to tell them what I need, and also have some small talk so I can get to

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know them a bit. I basically just want to connect with the locals without having to use English.'

Discussion

As Tita mentioned in Week 1, it is important that you are as specific as you can in the answers, imagining a realistic scenario.

3 Four areas to master

As I look back on my own experience of taking a new language from complete beginner to fluency, I can identify four 'buckets' that I have needed to become good at, in order to learn with some efficiency and fast-track the process.

Those are:

1. Linguistic – learning the language itself
2. Cultural – understanding the culture
3. Methodological – your language learning method
4. Self – staying focused and motivated

Figure 2 The four areas to master.

I have experienced both feeling a mastery of, and feeling utterly useless at, each of these four 'buckets'. These ups and downs have shown me that if any of these go wrong, you will struggle to reach your goals. On the other hand, when you learn to master these elements, you unlock the secret to learning any language quickly.

3.1 Linguistic

This is what is most familiar to aspiring language learners – the language itself. You need to master the various elements of that language, from the words it uses, to the order you put them in.

Activity 2 Matching the linguistic elements
Allow about 5 minutes

Look at the various linguistic elements of a language. Match each one to its definition.

Grammar

Pronunciation

Syntax

Vocabulary

Reading

Listening

Speaking

Writing

Match each of the items above to an item below.

The set of structural rules governing a language.

The way a word or a language is spoken.

The set of rules, principles and processes that govern the structure of sentences in a particular language, specifically word order.

The set of words you know in a particular language.

The process of decoding symbols (such as letters) to derive meaning.

The ability to pay attention to and effectively interpret what is being said, sung, played etc.

The ability to utter words or articulate sounds with the voice in order to communicate.

The process of expressing or communicating something by representing spoken language through the inscription or recording of signs and symbols, traditionally on paper on another such support.

Discussion

Learning a language means learning the elements of that language. In the following weeks, you will look in particular at learning vocabulary and at the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, which you will focus on in Weeks 4–7.

Laura says:

I think it is very common as a learner to focus too much on certain elements at the expense of others, simply because they are easier and more in your comfort zone. I think a balanced approach is key, and I have found that the different language elements are interdependent, so, for instance, a good grasp of pronunciation can also aid listening comprehension and so on.

3.2 Cultural

If you have ever travelled abroad, you'll know that the locals do things differently. *How* differently depends on the country.

The difference might be subtle, such as different meal times from what you're used to. If you've ever travelled to Spain, think for instance about the differences between the UK and Spain.

Box 1 An example

I was recently invited by a Spanish friend in London to go for lunch with her and some friends. We didn't confirm the exact time, and so I blocked off a few hours on my calendar on that day, and arranged to meet another friend afterwards – at 3pm. 'Even if it's a relaxed lunch', I thought, 'that will leave plenty of time'. The day arrived, and I texted my friend to ask what time we were meeting for lunch. 'At 3pm', came the reply. '¡Horario español!' – Spanish time – I had to scramble to rearrange my day! While lunch in the UK usually happens around midday or 1pm, it is an integral part of Spanish culture to eat late. *La cena*, dinner, can easily begin at 11pm. One can easily imagine the amount of comical misunderstandings that can happen as a result of arranging schedules around meal times. This is a cultural issue, rather than a linguistic one.

While the Spanish example is a fun one, it is not always so light-hearted. Having lived for almost two years in Qatar, an ultra-conservative Muslim state in the Gulf, I have experienced how the cultural misuse of language can have serious consequences.

Let's look at an example in the middle ground.

When I lived in Tokyo, I quickly learned that Japan is a society governed by conventions – things you are expected to say and do in all manner of situations, from sitting down to eat, to meeting someone new.

Activity 3 Thinking about etiquette
Allow about 30 minutes

Read the following: A short guide to Japanese etiquette. As you read it, imagine you are learning Japanese, perhaps because you will be transferred to Japan for work. Although it would be unreasonable for you to learn all the social customs from the start, are there any that you would want to learn as soon as possible? Are there any customs you would come to feel embarrassed to get wrong, as someone who is learning Japanese?

Figure 3 A Japanese tea ceremony.

Discussion

While you would probably not be expected to know every rule, and the advice to take your cue from others is usually a safe one, if you were the guest at a meal, you would need to know some basic rules. For instance, you should know about the etiquette for making toasts (as you would be expected to make one), for sitting arrangements (including where and how to sit), for starting to eat (saying *itidakimasu*, the equivalent to *bon appetit*) and for thanking your host for a great meal at the end. You should also know not to drink or eat until your Japanese host does. Not knowing both the cultural aspects to basic etiquette, as well as the set phrases expected in such situations, might seem impolite and offend your host.

On the other hand, the tea ceremony ritual is obviously extremely complex in terms of etiquette, and you probably would not be expected to be familiar with all of it. Again, the advice to take your cue from others would work in this setting.

Knowing the etiquette around hygiene is also important (e.g. removing your shoes, never stepping on the genkan but immediately stepping up onto the tatami in order not to bring dirt into the house, wiping your hands (not your face) with the towel provided before you touch any of the food, etc.). After all, if a foreign guest were to do something considered unhygienic in your culture at the dinner table (such as farting or picking their nose), you would find it rather rude!

Finally, to avoid awkward misunderstandings, you should know about the etiquette for paying for meals.

Cultural faux pas may not initially seem to be linked to the language, but you certainly cannot successfully learn a language without also behaving appropriately with its people. Learning a language means becoming culturally literate.

Laura says:

I think knowing the social and cultural conventions of the people whose language you are learning is important, but it is somewhat inevitable that at some point you will encounter hitherto unknown norms of behaviour. One useful strategy I use to minimise any social awkwardness in this context is to learn appropriate phrases of apology or ways to convey that I don't understand.

3.3 Methodological

You have already noted that learning a language means learning the words, phrases, grammar and so on, but how? How do you memorise the vocabulary, master the grammar or learn to understand native speakers?

When I first started learning languages on my own, aged 19, the only experience I had was that of my language classes at school. As a student, I wasn't particularly interested in languages and didn't have a very positive learning experience. In French class, we would practise giving directions to the station ad infinitum. For homework, we would have a list of ten French words to memorise.

When I suddenly discovered a desire to learn languages as an adult, the only way I knew how was to get a textbook and start memorising words. Needless to say, I didn't learn much at first.

Over the years, as I learned more languages, I began to notice new things that worked – often discovering them by accident. When I trained as a language teacher, I discovered many formal language teaching methodologies, such as the Audio-Lingual Method and the Communicative Approach.

The kind of questions I began to ask and answer are:

- Which activities are most effective?
- Should I study by myself or find a teacher?

- How should my method change as I become more proficient?
- Does watching movies help?

I noticed that, as I became a better language learner, I developed certain skills:

- Self-monitoring (DeKeyser, 2007) – being able to identify my own strengths and weaknesses as a speaker of a foreign language without relying on someone to point them out to me
- Noticing (Schmidt, 1990) – being able to read or listen to the language I was learning and notice important features, enabling me to improve independently
- Obtaining feedback (Little and Ushioda,1998) – seeking out people, such as language exchange partners, who could give me feedback on my speaking. For example, by correcting what I say or answering my questions.

These days, I have all but stopped following any one method, and simply learn languages in the way I have realised are most effective – at least for me.

And it's that last bit that's key: *For me*.

There are many ways to learn a language, and your goal should be to figure out what works *for you personally*. The key to becoming a successful language learner and developing the ability to learn languages quickly is to discover how you learn best.

Learning a language means discovering how you learn best.

3.4 Self

As if there wasn't already enough to learn, you also have to be in control of yourself. Focus, discipline, motivation, emotions: these factors all govern whether or not you turn up and study in the first place.

The perfect method, a great textbook or the world's best teacher, are of no help to you if you're not disciplined enough to study every day or if you feel too anxious to practise speaking with people.

On the other hand, if you remain focused, and work at it day after day, you will struggle not to make progress.

All of this, of course, is easier said than done. Until you have the experience of learning a language, you will be at the mercy of your surroundings, for better or for worse. When you are more experienced, you can learn to create your own conditions to help you learn more effectively, wherever you live in the world.

Box 2 An example

When I learned Spanish, I was living in the UK. I became good friends with a Spanish speaker and decided to take the opportunity to learn Spanish. We were studying at the same university and spent a lot of time together. Without having to study particularly hard, I was able to become fairly fluent in Spanish over the course of a year, simply by speaking it every day. (Luckily, my motivation to learn Spanish turned out to be stronger than my friend's motivation to learn English.) It was the ideal language learning environment, possibly even better than moving to Spain.

Many years later, I moved to Japan. Japanese was the first Asian language I had learned and it proved to be far harder than I expected. I struggled to make friends who would speak

> to me in Japanese and my progress in the language was slow at best. In spite of living in the country itself – in theory an ideal language learning environment – I found myself becoming demotivated and losing the will to study by myself. Overcoming this obstacle was one of my biggest language learning challenges. However, the experience of coming through it and successfully learning Japanese gave me the tools necessary for me to now engineer a good language-learning environment wherever I am in the world.

Learning a language is a big task. Comparable to writing a novel, perhaps, it is an undertaking that many people will find it hard to see through due to the amount of time required to stay motivated and stick at it – and that's assuming you know how to do it in the first place.

Skills such as time management, overcoming the fear of speaking and dealing with negative experiences are not unique to language learning, but they affect is hugely.

You will look at these in more detail in the forthcoming weeks.

Activity 4 Reflecting on previous successful challenges
Allow about 20 minutes

Think about the last time you successfully completed a big task, e.g. passing a driving test, submitting your tax return, reading a hard book, perhaps for your studies. How did you control your environment to help you successfully complete the task? Did you struggle with anything? What?

Discussion

Motivation, self-discipline and focus are perhaps not what you were expecting from a course on learning languages. However, hopefully you can see from these examples how they have the power to make the difference between success and failure, and learning to be in control of your environment is perhaps the ultimate secret weapon!

Laura says:

Too often, people seem to think that, to learn a language, you have to have some secret inner talent that is unobtainable to most 'normal' folk. Thinking of language learning in the same way as other goals in life that require persistence and dedication makes it seem more attainable. You don't have to be a genius to learn a language. You just need perseverance and commitment.

Learning a language means working hard, staying disciplined and being in control of yourself and your environment. The work you did in Week 1 to identify your SMART goals but also to reflect on the potential barriers to your learning and the strategies to address them should enable you to stay focused and motivated.

4 This week's quiz

Well done – you have reached the end of Week 2 and can now take the weekly quiz to test your understanding.

Week 2 practice quiz

Open the quiz in a new tab or window (by holding ctrl [or cmd on a Mac] when you click the link) and come back here when you are done.

5 Summary of Week 2

By now, you are probably itching to get going, especially as there are so many resources out there for you to start learning a language.

You should now be able to:

- revisit your language learning aims
- understand four important areas that you need to master: the linguistic, the cultural, the methodological and the self.

Next week, Fernando will draw on some of his recent research to show you how to evaluate those resources, so you make the choices that are right for you.

You can now go to Week 3.

Week 3: Finding and evaluating language learning resources

Introduction

This week of the course is written by Fernando Rosell-Aguilar.

Figure 1 Fernando Rosell-Aguilar, author of Week 3.

So far, you have looked at motivation, setting realistic goals, and hopefully also gained a better understanding of what it means to learn a language. This week I will show you ways to find useful resources to support your language learning and present a framework to evaluate the resources you find according to your own individual learning needs.

By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- find resources for learning languages
- understand the different sorts of resources you can use
- choose and evaluate resources for language learning.

1 Where do I start?

Watch the following video in which two language learners talk about what they find hard about selecting and using resources.

Video content is not available in this format.

You may be taking a language course, and in that case your teacher may supply language learning materials or recommend that you buy a course book. Some people choose to do extra work on top their coursework and look for additional learning resources. Alternatively, you may be studying independently, or have stopped formal learning and are looking for resources to keep up with the language(s) you already have a good knowledge of. There are many resources available to support language learners: grammar books, books in the target language or bilingual books, graded readers, newspapers, films, TV channels, audio recordings, websites with all sorts of content, either aimed at language learners or at native speakers, and mobile apps, to name just a few. With such a wealth of material available yet often so little time to spend practising languages, it is sometimes hard to decide which material is the most appropriate for you.

2 Resources for language learning: classification

There is a wealth of resources available both in physical formats and online: bookshops (both high street and online) and sometimes large libraries stock books, CDs, DVDs, and newspapers in other languages. They may also stock dictionaries, grammar books and publications about the culture and history of the areas where your target language is spoken.

Online resources available include newspapers and websites from media outlets of the areas where your target language is spoken, which often offer text, audio and video streams either as websites or apps, as well as sites dedicated to any number of topics which you may find interesting to read in the target language. There are also websites and apps produced specifically for language learners.

We classify language learning resources as follows:

- those that are primarily designed as language learning tools
- those that are primarily designed for native speakers
- dictionaries and translators.

2.1 Resources: language-learning tools

Watch the following video in which the first of these different categories of resources are discussed.

Video content is not available in this format.

Have you tried these types of resource before? Full learning packages are particularly useful to learners who are at beginner and intermediate levels, as they offer ways to practise the language in fairly controlled environments, usually presented by clearly stated levels of difficulty. It's a good idea for the complete beginner to start with a book (with audio) that will offer such approach. The resources available for separate skills can vary in terms of quality and support they offer, but all of them can provide ways of practising your target language. You may want to browse your local library and bookshops or do online searches to find relevant materials for you.

2.2 Resources: designed for native speakers

Watch this next video about resources not primarily designed for language learning.

Video content is not available in this format.

A very useful aspect of these types of resources is that they can cater to all tastes and help you personalise your learning. Looking for equivalents in your target language of the type of material you like to read, watch or listen to in your own language will mean that you can expand your vocabulary and knowledge of your favourite subjects and improve your language in those areas at the same time. Whether you like current affairs, comic-books, style magazines, history, cinema: all these and many more are catered for.

Check nearby or online bookshops for materials available. If you are a member of a steaming or rental film provider, check whether they carry films and TV programmes in the language you are learning.

Laura says:

I like to watch programmes with subtitles in the target language, or turn them off completely, depending on how I feel. I also sometimes change the audio to watch English-language shows with Spanish dubbing.

2.3 Resources: dictionaries and translators

Now watch this video about resources for language learning: dictionaries and translators.

Video content is not available in this format.
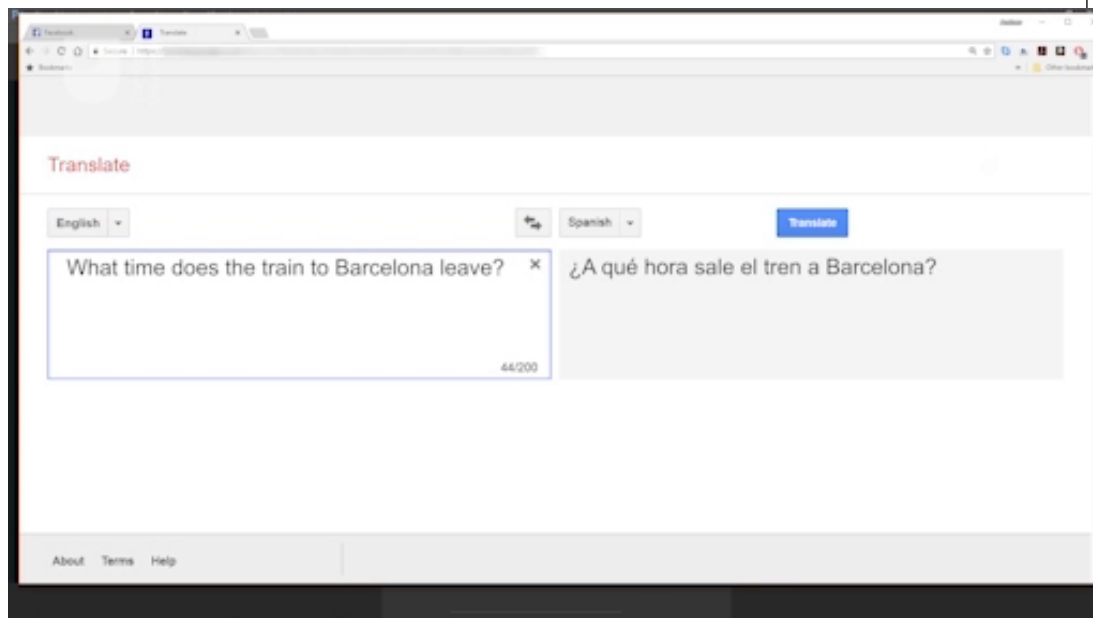
Laura says:

When I started learning Spanish, I was not sure how to choose the right dictionary. Some are marketed for beginners, and I started off with one of those when I first started learning Spanish, and then spent a little more money later on, and bought myself a more comprehensive dictionary.

Activity 1 Trying out online translators
Allow about 20 minutes

Go to an online newspaper or news organisation in your target language and copy a paragraph of text from a news item. Then go to an online translator, such as Google Translate, and paste the text onto the translation box to provide a translation into your main language. Look at the results. Does the text make sense?

Discussion
It is probably good enough to enable you to understand what the text is about, but it is probably not 100 per cent grammatically correct. Most likely there will be some sentences that convey the meaning effectively, but may sound slightly odd, as if someone who isn't familiar with the language style wrote them. So if you use an online translator to translate a text you have written in your main language into your target language, don't expect it to be totally correct either.

Laura says:

I think that when you start learning a language, it's easy to fall into the trap of using online translators without realising that the translation often contains mistakes, so this is a useful exercise to show why you must be careful.

Laura says:

3 Are language-learning resources free?

Many of the online resources primarily designed for native speakers are offered for free, including radio programmes, news channels and many newspapers. Physical resources (books, DVDs and so on) are mostly not free, and users need to pay to purchase or rent them. Similarly, many providers of language learning materials offer an amount of free materials. Some offer everything for free and others just a sample before users are asked for a payment or subscription. Some people think that all online resources should be free, and many download or access copyrighted material illegally. We encourage you not to do this. The authors and developers of these materials have worked hard to produce them, and it may be their only source of income.

4 Choosing and evaluating language-learning resources

Finding resources is only the first step. You may be overwhelmed by the amount of resources you find, and your time to spend using these may be limited. It's very important that you choose the activities that offer the best solutions for your own individual needs as a language learner. But how do you decide which resource works best for you? Since many of the resources offer at least some content for free, you can try out what works and what doesn't. Let's look at a framework that can help you evaluate the resources you find.

The framework is divided into four primary categories: language learning, pedagogy, user experience, and technology, each with a number of criteria. The evaluation framework is presented as a list of questions to help you decide whether a resource meets your learning needs. Watch the video below to find out more.

Video content is not available in this format.

How many of the criteria does a resource need to meet to be considered apt for language learning?

Well, there isn't really a minimum set of criteria that must be met, and as a learner you may find a resource useful or not depending on your purpose, your learning preferences, your location, your personal circumstances, and other factors. In addition, some criteria will only apply to a resource depending on what it is supposed to do. For example, there would be no point in evaluating a vocabulary resource negatively for not offering grammar practice, as that is not the point of the resource. We would, however, expect resources that claim to offer a full language learning experience, to receive a positive evaluation for a higher number of the criteria.

5 Evaluation activity

In the following activity you will evaluate an app used for language learning.

Activity 2 Evaluating a resource

Allow about an hour

If you have a smartphone or tablet, download a free app that offers language-learning courses, such as Duolingo or busuu from your app store (or check for something else you like the look of under the Education > Learn a new language category in your app store). Spend 20–30 minutes trying out the different features it provides and then consider the questions below. If you do not have access to a smartphone or tablet or would rather evaluate another resource, perhaps one that you use regularly or a free resource you've found online, then do so.

Score a mark from 0 to 5 for each question, or N/A if the criterion is not applicable to your resource

Language learning:	Score (0 to 5 or N/A)
Name of the app	*Provide your answer...*
Reading: does the resource provide texts in the target language?	*Provide your answer...*
Listening: does the resource provide audio in the target language?	*Provide your answer...*
Writing: does the resource offer opportunities to write in the target language?	*Provide your answer...*
Speaking: does the resource offer opportunities to speak in the target language?	*Provide your answer...*
Vocabulary: does the resource offer specific activities for vocabulary acquisition?	*Provide your answer...*
Grammar: does the resource offer specific activities for grammar practice?	*Provide your answer...*
Pronunciation and intonation: does the resource offer specific activities for pronunciation and intonation?	*Provide your answer...*
Cultural information: does the resource include information about customs and traditions in the areas where the language is spoken?	*Provide your answer...*
Use of visual content: are images and videos stereotypical or stock images? Do they	*Provide your answer...*

represent the diversity of the areas where the language is spoken?	
Language varieties: does the resource include different regional or national varieties of the language?	*Provide your answer...*
Pedagogy:	
Description: does the resource description match what the resource does?	*Provide your answer...*
Teaching: does the resource present, explain or model language or does it just test it?	*Provide your answer...*
Progress: does the resource allow the user to track progress or see previous attempts?	*Provide your answer...*
Scaffolding: do activities in the resource progress in difficulty in a way that supports the learner?	*Provide your answer...*
Feedback: does the resource provide feedback? Is it just right/wrong or meaningful explanations?	*Provide your answer...*
Quality of content: does the content have any errors/omissions?	*Provide your answer...*
Use of media: does the resource make use of sound, images and video in a meaningful way?	*Provide your answer...*
Differentiation: does the resource offer different levels depending on ability? Can these be accessed directly?	*Provide your answer...*
Engagement: does the resource keep the user interested or are activities repetitive?	*Provide your answer...*
User experience:	
Interaction: does the resource allow users to interact with each other?	*Provide your answer...*
Interactivity: is engagement with the resource content active or passive?	*Provide your answer...*
Sharing: does the resource allow or encourage sharing content?	*Provide your answer...*
Badging: does the resource provide recognition that can be shared on social media?	*Provide your answer...*
Price: does the user need to pay to download the resource? Is there a trial version?	*Provide your answer...*
Registration: does the resource require the user to register?	*Provide your answer...*

Advertising: does the resource include pop-up ads? Are these distracting?	*Provide your answer...*
Technology issues:	
Interface: is the interface clear and uncluttered?	*Provide your answer...*
Navigation: is the resource intuitive to navigate, with clear menus and options?	*Provide your answer...*
Instructions: does the resource offer instructions on how to use it?	*Provide your answer...*
Stability: does the resource freeze or crash?	*Provide your answer...*
Gamification: does the resource have game-like features to increase engagement?	*Provide your answer...*
Support: does the resource have a help section?	*Provide your answer...*
Offline work: does the resource require an internet connection to work?	*Provide your answer...*

How did the resource score? Did going through the questions help you to think about what the resource offers and lacks? Spend 5 to 10 minutes writing a short reflection about how engaging with the questions may be useful or not when you next consider a resource.

Laura says:

One of the things I think is important when I choose an app is what criteria are the most important for me at the time, so which ones I will prioritise above others. For instance, the gamification aspect is fun, but the stability of the app is much more important.

6 Too many resources?

With so many resources to choose from, it can be hard to choose which ones to prioritise. It's usually rewarding to focus on activities that you find easy, say for example using flashcards to test yourself on vocabulary. Getting them right and decreasing the number of items that you fail to remember feels like a worthwhile activity. But such activity can distract you from focusing on other activities that may be harder and less rewarding, but fill a bigger gap in your language learning needs. A good way to approach the selection of resources is therefore to think first about what you need more practice on: reading? Writing? Listening? Speaking? Pronunciation? Vocabulary revision? Memorising verb forms? Having a clear outcome of what you want to achieve will help you select resources that focus on what you need. Your time is limited and you need to use it wisely, so adjusting your SMART goals regularly is a useful task that will keep you focussed. And as Olly said in Week 2, learning a language means working hard, staying disciplined, and being in control of yourself and your environment.

7 This week's quiz

You can now take the weekly quiz to test your understanding.

Week 3 practice quiz

Open the quiz in a new tab or window (by holding ctrl [or cmd on a Mac] when you click the link) and come back here when you are done.

8 Summary of Week 3

Now that you have a framework to evaluate resources, we will turn to looking at the different language skills.

You should now be able to:

- find resources for learning languages
- understand the different sorts of resources that you can use
- choose and evaluate resources for language learning.

Next week, Tita will guide you through ways to improve your speaking

You can now go to Week 4.

Week 4: Speaking

Introduction

This week of the course is written by Tita Beaven.

So far in this course you have looked at motivation, at what it means to learn a language, and at how to evaluate resources for language learning. From now on, roll up your sleeves and prepare to get up close and personal with speaking, listening, learning vocabulary and reading and writing in your chosen language.

By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- understand what is involved in speaking
- understand ways to practise speaking on your own and with others
- understand different activities that you can do to practise your speaking skills.

1 Speaking is not a discreet skill

The main reason why people learn a language is usually because they want to speak it. Speaking is probably the ultimate goal for most language learners. One important thing to highlight right at the start of this week is that speaking is not a discreet skill, but one that is inextricably linked to other aspects of language learning, most notably listening, vocabulary and grammar, and to automaticity.

After all, in order to speak, you need to know words and be able to put them together to make coherent sentences, and you need to do this fairly fast, so you need to access the right vocabulary and grammatical forms without thinking too much about it. Moreover, you need to be able to understand what your interlocutor is saying, hence the importance of listening skills when developing your speaking. You might spend some time thinking about how you are going to ask for directions to a museum or thinking about how to ask a new local friend to tell you about life in their country, but if you can't understand the answer, you will not be very successful in your communicative exchange.
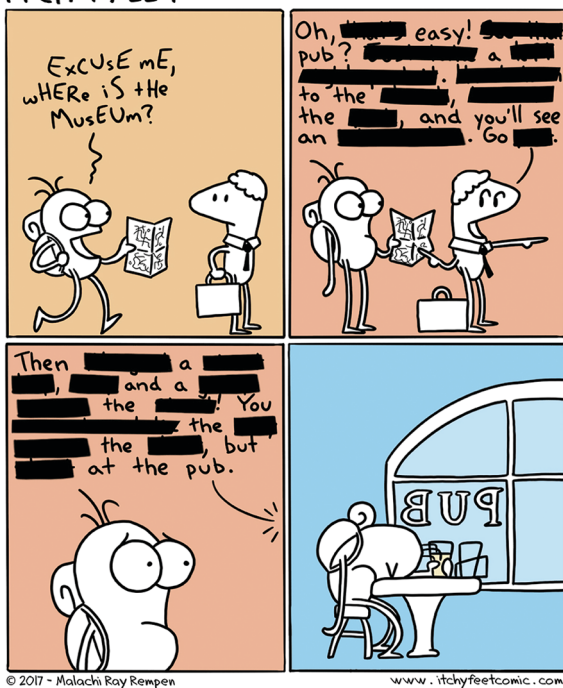
Figure 1 Asking for directions

This week you are going to think about what is involved in speaking, and then look at practical ways to develop your speaking skills.

2 So, what is involved in speaking?

There are lots of ways of thinking about this. On the one hand, speaking is about conveying information (and I mean information in the broadest sense of the word, whether this is factual, about your feelings and emotions, or anything else). In order to convey information, you need to speak accurately (using the right words and stringing them along in grammatically correct sentences), and fluently (if you are too hesitant, or too slow, your audience will find it hard to follow you, or might lose patience and disconnect). Your pronunciation will also need to be good enough not to make understanding you too taxing for your interlocutor. And you will also have to think about your intonation (in some languages, for instance, it is through intonation rather than word order or specific structures that you know if someone is making a statement or asking a question).

On the other hand, it is very unusual that you will be 'just' speaking (unless you happen to be giving a lecture or recording a podcast on your own) – most often, you will be speaking with someone, so engaging in interaction with that person: in that sense, speaking is very dependent on listening and understanding, which is why it very often causes a lot of anxiety in learners.

Watch the following video where some language learners talk about their anxiety when speaking in a foreign language.

Video content is not available in this format.

Now watch the next video, where some learners talk about how they practise their speaking skills.

Video content is not available in this format.

Speaking is, in some ways, similar to writing – in both cases you need to produce meaningful content using the right words and the right grammar. But whereas when writing you often have time to think about what you are going to say and how you are going to say it and can check a word up in the dictionary, for instance, when speaking you just have to produce your language 'on the fly'. And whereas in writing you can often go back and check what you've written, and correct any mistakes, once you have uttered your words in speaking, you can't really 'un-say' them.

Most spoken language is unplanned, spontaneous, takes place face-to-face, and is informal conversation. But although that might be your ultimate goal when starting to learn a language, it is very difficult to achieve, and requires literally hundreds of hours of practice.

Activity 1 Speaking recall quiz
Allow about 5 minutes

Match the definitions of the following words used in this section.

The quality of being correct, precise and free from mistakes of errors.

The quality of being efficient, speaking articulately without unnecessary or overlong pauses.

The rise and fall of the voice in speaking.

The way the sounds of the language are pronounced, the ability to make those sounds in the correct or a particular way.

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Accuracy

Fluency

Intonation

Pronunciation

3 How to practise on your own

Some people advocate that you start speaking from day one, and if you like the idea, the next section will show you how you can do that, but I personally find that a little overwhelming. If, like me, you are a bit of an introvert, you might want to start practising speaking to yourself.

Although it might seem like a funny idea, speaking to yourself out loud gives you plenty of opportunity to get your tongue around all those new sounds of the language you are learning, and to try out bits of conversations such as common or set phrases until you feel you can say them without thinking too much about them.

It is also very useful to record yourself speaking (or even reading), and to listen to yourself again, so you can start evaluating whether you are pronouncing sounds correctly. If you have access to any audio with transcripts, it is a great idea to read along at the same time as the audio, a process known as shadow-reading, and even recording yourself as you do that, so you can also work on your fluency and intonation. Recording yourself every day reading a short passage or simply talking about your day is a really good way to get regular practice and to monitor your progress. You might want to choose a time to do this when others will not disturb you, as at first you will probably feel rather self-conscious.

However, you also need to realise that if your aim is to talk to others in your foreign language, sooner or later you are going to have to talk to others. In the next section, I will show you one of the most effective and enjoyable ways of doing that.

4 Find a language exchange partner

Figure 2 Speaking a language.

One great way to get speaking practice from the start is to get a language exchange partner.

A language exchange partner is basically someone who speaks the language you are learning, and who wants to learn the language you speak. In a typical language exchange session, which might last an hour, for instance, you might spend the first half hour speaking in the language you are learning, and the next 30 minutes speaking in the language you partner is learning. Language exchanges have two great benefits: one is that both partners have a stake in making the exchange work, and the other one is that they are free.

If you live in a large city, you might be able to do a language exchange face-to-face. Check online for 'conversation exchange in …' and the name of your city. You can also check out Meetup to see if there are any conversation groups meeting nearby. Conversation groups are informal get-togethers of language enthusiasts who meet up to practise a language. You might find something like a French and English conversation group, which attracts both learners of French, and French native speakers who want to practise their English. You might find that the group is too advanced or you might feel a bit intimidated if you are a beginner, but it is worth a try, as you will meet a group of learners who share your interest.

I live in a small town myself, so for me a much better alternative is to do language exchanges online. There are a number of platforms where you can find online conversation partners, and typing 'language exchange platform' on a search engine should bring up several possibilities. Notice that some platforms, such as italki.com, also offer lessons with teachers, so if you want to do a free exchange rather than a paid-for class, make sure you look for the 'partners' section of the website.

> ## Activity 2 Find a language exchange partner or conversation group
> Allow about 30 minutes
>
> Go online and look for a language exchange platform or a meetup in your town. If you find one you like, sign up now.

Once you've found a platform you like and you've signed up for it, make sure you complete your profile with a bit of information about yourself, so that potential language exchange partners know what you are looking for. Adding a photo of yourself also helps. Similarly, look for partners that you think you might get on with – check out their hobbies or interests, as if you have something in common you are more likely to get on and be able to chat about things that interest both of you.

A good strategy if you are a beginner is to find a speaking partner who has a higher level in the language they want to practice with you. For instance, I practise my very basic German with a partner who speaks fairly good English. That way, for half of the session, we can have interesting, grown-up conversations and we have, over several months, become good friends. Because we can have interesting, fun, meaningful conversations in one of the languages, English, and we have formed a good relationship through English, we can both sit still for the much more basic and stilted conversations we have in German. If we were both beginners in our respective languages, I am fairly sure the exchange would by now have fizzled out.

Once you have found a language exchange partner, arrange a time to meet online, using a service that enables you to do free calls, such as Skype. It is worth exchanging a couple of messages with your partner before you meet for your first exchange, and make sure you both agree how the session is going to work. It is also useful to agree the number of sessions you want to start with – say half a dozen – and at the end of that period, review if you want to carry on for another set period.

> ## Laura says:
>
> My first experience with an online exchange partner did not go very well. We only exchanged a brief note about what time to meet and our Skype usernames. When we started, it was immediately apparent that my partner only wanted to speak English, and was not too interested in helping me learn Spanish. It did take me a few attempts to find 'the right fit', but exchanging a few e-mails beforehand and outlining what exactly we both wanted to get out of each session meant that my online language sessions became something I actually looked forward to each week. I would also recommend setting a time limit of 20–30 minutes each, so that the whole session isn't taken up with one language.

5 Learning speaking directly or indirectly?

One approach to learning a skill is to learn the skill itself. If you want to learn to speak with proficient or native speakers in a foreign language, go ahead and speak with them. The idea is that if you do that from the start you will get better at it.

Another approach, the deliberate-practice method, is to learn a skill such as speaking more indirectly. Even if your final goal is still to learn to speak with a proficient or native speaker, you can break that skill into its constituent parts, and learn those bit by bit.

In order to learn to speak spontaneously, like a fluent speaker, you don't have to start by speaking spontaneously, and be like a fluent speaker. You can develop your fluency and your accuracy by practising different, smaller tasks that develop specific skills. So, rather than trying to launch into a conversation about any topic on day one, when you might not actually have the vocabulary or structures available to do so, you can start by practising the vocabulary, or the grammar point. It is a bit like learning to drive by either launching straight into driving on a road, or starting with practising individual components, such as how to change gear, how to do a turn in the road and how to do a hill start before putting it all together.

So for instance, if you wanted to be able to have a conversation about what you did in your last holiday, the 'deliberate-practice' method might involve starting by looking up some vocabulary to talk about your holiday and checking the pronunciation of any words you are not sure about with your language exchange partner in one session. Then, before the next session, you could prepare several sentences about your last holiday in order to practice that vocabulary and how to talk about the past, and you could go over those sentences with your language exchange partner, who can correct any mistakes and help you pronounce the sentences confidently. Then, before the third session, you might want to prepare some questions to find out about a recent holiday (Where did you go? How long did you go for? etc.), and see if you can answer your own questions. You could then get your language partner to ask you the questions you've prepared, so that you do a sort of prompted dialogue. Then you could then also ask your partner the questions you've prepared and listen to their answers, checking that you understand and making a note of any new vocabulary or structures. After you've done all these separate bits of practice, in a following language exchange session you might actually be already to have a simple, 'spontaneous' conversation with your language exchange partner about your last holiday and also ask them about theirs. As you'll learn in Week 6, when we look at vocabulary in more detail, you will also find that going over the same vocabulary and structures in several language exchange sessions will help you to get that vocabulary and those structures into your long-term memory.

To recap, in the first method, the task you do is the same as your final aim – you launch straight into having a conversation. In the second method, the tasks you do are different from your final aim of having a conversation, but you can think of them as the steps that eventually enable you to get there. In taking those smaller steps, you are getting the practice needed to develop your overall speaking skills, but it is much less daunting and overwhelming.

You are probably familiar with the expression 'practice makes perfect'. Well, research has shown that that is not totally accurate. Practice just makes permanent. In order for your performance to be perfect, you need to actually engage in deliberate, specific and focused practice. If you play a musical instrument or if you play sports, you probably understand what this means well. As a novice piano player, for instance, you can stumble through a

piece and make mistakes as you go. Every time you play the piece from beginning to end, you probably make the same mistakes and stumble on the same tricky sections. As my piano teacher used to say, playing something ten times making the same mistake every time is not going to make you play it any better (and it didn't…). What is going to help is to identify the sections that you find tricky and to concentrate on each one of those sections, practising each one separately until you get them right, and only then putting the whole thing back together again in the performance of the whole piece. When you are practising speaking, it is also useful to focus on specific aspects one at a time, and to get feedback on each of those aspects, so you can improve them. It is useful to do tasks (like the one about holidays discussed earlier) over and over again, focusing on different aspects every time. By doing that, you are in fact 'overlearning', or continuing to practice something after you get quite good at it, so that it becomes consolidated into your long-term memory.

6 Take control

One of the worries when you do a conversation exchange and you are a beginner is that you might run out of things to say, that you might not know the words to say what you want to, or that you might not understand what your partner is saying or, even worse, what they are asking you. However, these are all things you can control by taking control of the session.

For instance, you can prepare a set of questions on a specific topic, and also prepare your answers to those questions in your target language. During the language exchange, you can ask your partner to ask you the questions you have prepared or, even better, you can take it in turns to ask and answer questions. Here's an example you can use for your very first language exchange, and you can find more in the link below.
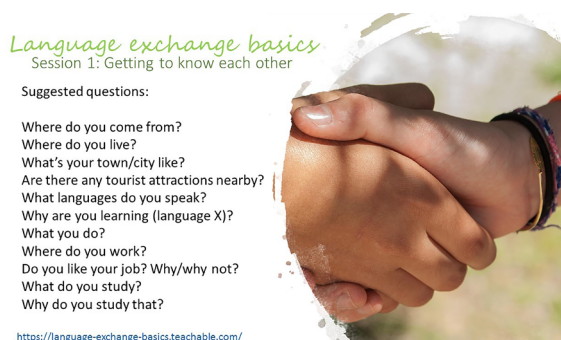
Figure 3 Language exchange basics.

For a whole set of suggested questions to get you through your first ten language exchange sessions, have a look at Language Exchange Basics (launching soon).

One useful technique to deal with language exchanges if you are a beginner is to let your partner ask you one of the questions you have already prepared before the exchange, answer them, and then ask them 'and you?'

So for instance, if your partner asks where you live, you can answer something simple, like 'I live in Brighton, and you?' That way, you will know the sort of thing your partner is going to answer, and it will give you some useful listening practice to find out how a native would answer the same question.

7 Ideas for beginners

I have talked to dozens of exchange participants as part of my research, and I know that people use conversation partners for all sorts of language practice. These are some of the things you can do with a partner if you are staring to learn a language, so at levels A1 and A2.

Using photos

A useful technique to make your language exchange sessions fun and relevant is to use photos. You can, for instance, share some photos of your town, the last place you went to on holiday or your family and friends. Because they are photos of places and people that are part of your life, you will inevitably be talking about things you know (and care) about, so the conversation (and the vocabulary you will need for it) will feel more relevant. It will also help to create a connection with your language exchange partner.

If you don't want to share photos of places and people that are too personal, you can use photos that are less so. For instance, in my last language exchange session, I was talking to my partner about a planned weekend away in Vienna, and I was sharing with her some photos I had found online of various tourist attractions, coffee houses and even a transport map, which enabled us to practise a lot of the language I would need in my forthcoming trip.

Playing games

There are lots of language games you can play, even as a beginner, and some of these are great in language exchange settings. Guessing games work well: for instance, if you are learning to describe houses, talk about the different rooms in your home and the furniture in each room, you can play a version of '20 questions' where you think of an item of furniture and your partner has to try to guess what it is by asking you questions to which you can only answer yes or no. You can take it in turns to play, and as the structures and vocabulary are quite predictable, it is something you can prepare for effectively before the lesson.

You can also play guessing games by finding a selection of photos. For instance you can look for images of specific things in your search engine and take a screenshot to share with your partner and play 20 questions. Here for instance is a screenshot of images related to 'people at work' – so you could ask your partner to select one image without telling you which one, and try to guess which has been chosen by asking yes/no questions such as: Are there lots of people in the picture? Are there any women? Is anyone wearing a helmet? Is anyone standing up?

Figure 4 An example search for images of people at work.

You can use this technique to practise all sorts of vocabulary.

Writing and reading

In your language exchange, you can go through a piece of writing you have done in advance of the session, and read it to your partner. Ask them for help with making it sound more idiomatic, or to correct any mistakes. Also ask them for help with any words you are not sure how to pronounce. You can also ask them to read the text for you, and record it, so you can listen to it after the session - but remember to always ask for permission to record first.

If you are reading simple stories or articles as part of your language-learning 'diet' (see Week 6), you might want to write a summary and then read it to your partner, again asking for corrections with the writing and the pronunciation.

You might think that reading out aloud what you have read is **not** speaking, and you would be right, of course, but remember that you are practising the sub-skills of using the right vocabulary, correct, idiomatic expressions and refining your pronunciation and intonation, all of which are useful in preparing to speak naturally and spontaneously. You are also building up your confidence, which is essential.

8 Top tips

Here are my top tips to make language exchanges work:

- Find a language exchange partner. Don't procrastinate – go online now and sign up to a language exchange. Make it your goal to find three potential conversation partners and set up three language exchange sessions with them this week. I know it's scary, but trust me: do it, and you will never look back.

- Look for a language exchange partner with whom you have something in common (hobbies, work, interests).

- Try to find a time slot that works for both of you (e.g. Tuesday evenings at 7.30) and stick to it, meeting every week.

- Split the time of the exchange equally and stick to it. If your partner is quite fluent in English and you are a beginner in their language, it is easy to spend more time in English than in the language you want to practise. I find that starting with one language one week, and the other language the following week helps to keep things even. Also, set a timer to 30 minutes, so you know when it's time to swap languages.

- Be prepared. If you are a beginner, it is especially important that you prepare for your language exchange, otherwise you might find that you dry up or run out of things to say. And remember, the onus is on you to decide how best to use your 30 minutes. My research has shown that beginners who don't prepare for their exchanges soon become demotivated.

- Although it is tempting to stick to the same tried and tested activities, do try out new things, and make them fun.

- If your partner speaks English at an intermediate level or above, and you are not sure what to talk about, ask them to find interesting things to talk about in the English part of the session. One of my conversation partners often sends me a short article or a TED video in English, which I watch before the session, and it means we always have lots of interesting things to discuss in the English part of the session.

- Finally, it is a good idea to start off by setting yourself the task to try 2 or 3 partners in your first week. One of them at least is bound to be just what you need or you might be lucky and find several languages exchange partners you get on with.

Activity 3 Taking the next step on your language exchange platform
Allow about 30 minutes

If you are interested in trying out a language exchange and have signed up on one of the available platforms, go and update your profile now, providing some information about yourself. Then, look for three possible language exchange partners and get in touch with them, with the aim of meeting up in the next seven days.

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9 What happens if it doesn't work?

Sometimes, you might find that you have found a partner that is unreliable and doesn't turn up at the arranged time, that they speak too fast even when you tell them to slow down, or that you simply have little in common or don't get on. If that's the case, the best thing to do is to stop the language exchange sessions, and to find yourself another partner.

Also, remember that most learners are nervous when they first start trying to speak the language that they are learning. I know I am, but I remind myself that every language learner has been in the same boat. Everyone has to start somewhere.

10 This week's quiz

Now it's time to complete the Week 4 badge quiz. It is similar to previous quizzes, but this time, instead of answering 5 questions, there will be 15.

Week 4 compulsory badge quiz

Remember, this quiz counts towards your badge. If you're not successful the first time, you can attempt the quiz again in 24 hours.

Open the quiz in a new tab or window (by holding ctrl [or cmd on a Mac] when you click the link) and come back here when you are done.

11 Summary of Week 4

You should now be able to:

- understand what is involved in speaking
- understand different ways to practise speaking on your own and with others
- understand different activities that you can do to practise your speaking skills.

Next week, Olly will talk about listening which, as you've seen this week, is the other side of the coin.

You can now go to Week 5.

Week 5: Listening

Introduction

This week of the course is written by Olly Richards.

Last week, you looked at the first of the four language skills, speaking. When asked why they are learning a language, most people say 'because I want to speak it'. Although speaking is an important skill, for me listening is the key skill, and this week I will show you why, and guide you through core study skills to develop your listening.

By the end of this week, you will be able to:

- understand what is involved in listening
- find out about the difference between intensive and extensive listening
- understand the different types of authentic and graded audio, and look for audio resources for yourself.

1 In what situations are listening skills required?

Listening is regarded by many language learners to be key to developing competence in a language. Why is that?

Well, as you learned in Week 2, many people think about their language learning goals in these terms: 'I want to *speak* fluently'. However, if you can't understand what's being said in any given situation, does it really matter how good your speaking is?

This week you're going to explore the skill of listening and answer the following questions:

- What does it mean to listen in a foreign language?
- How much should you be able to understand?
- What are the different kinds of listening?
- What's the best way to improve your listening skills?
- How can you listen and understand when you're still a beginner?

Activity 1 Reflecting on your native language listening
Allow about 30 minutes

Think about the last 24 hours in your life. Write down every time you had to listen in the language you use most often. Think of as many examples as you can (e.g. watching TV, conversation with a colleague, meeting, ordering lunch).

Look over your list. Now think back to those situations you wrote down, and imagine what would happen if you were unable to understand. How differently would you experience life?

Discussion
You might be surprised at not only how often you need to listen, but how important listening is to living your life.

---

2 What's involved in successful listening?

In the activity you've just done, you were probably only evaluating those times when you had to listen in one major way: understanding what you were listening to.

In other words, was the message received and understood?

But understanding the message is actually only the end result, or outcome, of the listening process. As a language learner, when you first start listening to your new language, you're not going to understand very much. (We all start there, don't worry.) This course is all about learning how to learn, so in order to gain control over improving your listening skills, you need to appreciate exactly what it is that you're listening to, so you have a basis on which to work on it.

So, what are the component parts that make each language unique?

Table 1 The components parts of a language

Phoneme	Each of the individual sounds in a language.
Tone	In some languages, such as Chinese, a particular pitch pattern on a syllable which changes the meaning of the word.
Intonation	The rise and fall of the speaker's voice.
Word/sentence stress	Accentuating a certain syllable within a word/ certain words within a sentence.
Connected speech	The continuous stream of sounds with no clear-cut borderlines between words that characterises the spoken discourse.
Accent	A distinctive way of pronouncing a language, especially because of the speaker's country or area of origin or social class.

Activity 2 Components that make a language unique
Allow about 15 minutes

Listen to this extract of a foreign language that's very different from English. You probably won't understand what's being said, so instead, listen closely to the sound of the language – every sound and every detail. Imagine you are learning this language – what are all the characteristics of the language, and how does it differ from languages you speak?

Audio content is not available in this format.

Which of the following elements of this language would you need to be able to hear in order to understand it?

○ All of these
○ Phonemes
○ Tones
○ Intonation
○ Word/sentence stress
○ Connected speech

○ Accents

Some languages share many characteristics depending on their shared roots. For example, phonemes in English and German are similar. However, other languages are strikingly different. The language you heard in the previous example is Mandarin, a *tonal language*. In tonal languages, the exact same sound can mean different things depending if it's pronounced with, for example, a high, medium, low, rising or falling tone. There are endless characteristics of language that we could talk about here, but the main lesson is that, in order to become a good listener, you need to be intimately familiar with the features of your target language.

Only once you know the parts can you understand the whole.

3 Setting expectations

Figure 1 A listening exercise in a classroom

If you learned a language at school or have studied in a language school, you might remember what it's like when the teacher plays a recording in class and you have to answer questions about what you hear.

For many people, this kind of classroom listening activity is the only experience of listening to a foreign language they've had. It might seem quite unforgiving. You're used to being put on the spot, and either getting the answers right or wrong.

But, of course, real language doesn't occur in the classroom. On the one hand, you rarely have the benefits of a silent classroom and the ability to play the recording multiple times. On the other hand, you're rarely given a test immediately after listening.

This is good news because, as you'll see, you already have plenty of training of listening in difficult conditions in your mother tongue.

Activity 3 Typical listening situations
Allow about 15 minutes

Listen to the following recording of a typical listening situation you might encounter in English.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Listen to the recording again. What makes it difficult?

Audio content is not available in this format.

In this situation, something is happening that makes it difficult for you to understand.

What percentage of total words do you think you were able to understand?

If you are a confident English speaker, did you notice that you were still able to follow along, despite not being able to hear or understand every word?

You see, even in your native language, listening conditions are often not ideal. But in spite of that difficulty you can still understand. You do this by focusing on key words or bits of information from the speaker and ignoring the rest.

Now think back to a time when you were speaking to someone in your target language or a listening test in school. How did it feel when you started to listen, but didn't understand a word that was said?

Discussion

In fact, there are plenty of other things that can cause us confusion in our mother tongues too.

You've seen how you can follow a conversation perfectly well with only a few key words. But, for some reason, when the same thing happens in a foreign language, it sets alarm bells ringing. As we'll see below, one strategy that helps in these situations is to know how to ask for clarification in your target language.

However, panicking over not understanding a word is actually illogical, given that you do this all the time in your mother tongue without a problem.
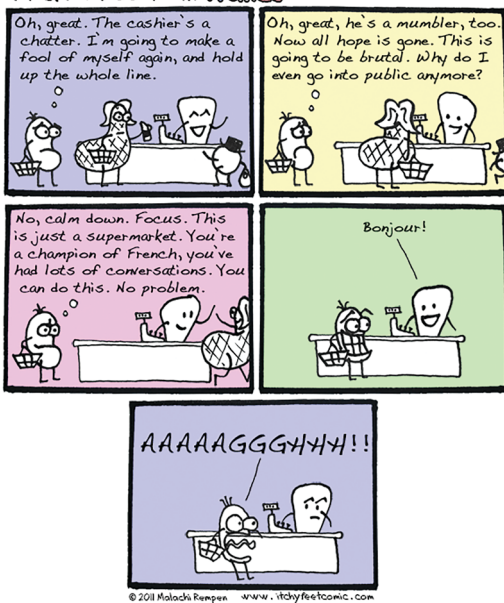
Figure 2 Understanding French

You may have panicked – many people do. You may have worried so much about what that word meant that you forgot to listen to the rest of the recording. Alternatively, you might have just 'tuned out' and given up.

Activity 4 Conversations without context
Allow about 10 minutes

Imagine you overhear this conversation.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Now imagine a friend asked you what the conversation you overheard was about. What would you say?

You likely wouldn't know what to say – it made no sense to you, even though you understood every word.

Discussion

Figure 3 Hanging a picture on a wall.

What was lacking first time round was context. Body language and facial expressions also play a large part in communication and helping you to understand.

Without context, words have far less (or no) meaning. People may be speaking in your mother tongue and you may understand every word, but you're still left confused.

This might also happen if you:

- overhear a conversation on a bus
- you get mistaken for somebody else and asked a question that makes no sense to you
- turn on the radio in the middle of a discussion.

The point here is that listening is not always straightforward. So many things, other than the words themselves, determine whether you actually understand what you hear or not.

As such, you must bear this in mind as you listen to your target language.

- Can you understand the gist of what's being said, even though you don't know some of the words? A mindset shift might be all you need.
- Are you fully aware of the context? Don't be discouraged if you overhear a conversation in the street but don't understand what's going on.

Activity 5 Listening to technical explanations
Allow about 5 minutes

Listen to the following recording from an engineering course about the finite element method. How much of it do you understand?

Audio content is not available in this format.

In this case, you might have been able to understand the individual words, but, as they field is very specialised, you will also need to know about the subject in order to make sense about what the extract was about.

Of course, native speakers can usually survive in difficult listening situations because their knowledge of the overall language is so good. A major part of this is **vocabulary**.

In our earlier example of picking out the keywords to help you understand, you still need to know the keywords themselves and what they mean!

When you start learning a new language, one of the most important things you have to do is to grow your vocabulary. The faster you learn new words and phrases, and the more you add to your repertoire, the more you will be able to understand in the language. Next week, Tita will show you some techniques for growing your vocabulary, but it's important to highlight the link with listening skills at this stage.

The four skills, together with grammar and vocabulary acquisition, do not exist in isolation. You could spend a year practising advanced listening techniques, but if you don't know the words you're listening to, you'll never understand.

4 Listening: the big picture

In this section you're going to start talking about how to practise listening. When it comes to language learning pedagogy, you can consider there to be two main types of listening:

1. extensive listening
2. intensive listening.

It's vital to understand the difference between these two types of listening, because it will affect the results you get.

Activity 6 Learning about listening
Allow about 5 minutes

Match the two types of listening to their definitions.

Which do you do in a classroom?

> extensive listening

> intensive listening

Match each of the items above to an item below.

> listening to the general meaning, to understand the gist

> listening for specific information.

Discussion

Read the explanation that follows to understand the difference between the two types of listening.

If you walk into any language classroom around the world, the majority of listening activities you'll see being done by the teacher are *intensive listening*. Here's how it works:

- the teacher plays a recording
- the students listen and answer questions on the detail
- they then study to analyse the vocabulary and grammar in the text.

This kind of activity can be useful, but here's the important thing: this kind of activity is designed to improve your *language*, not your *listening*.

Although the activity involves listening, the actual amount of time you're spending listening is minimal. Much more time in the classroom is likely to be spent studying the language you heard through different vocabulary, grammar and comprehension activities later. In that sense, you're not really practising listening, you're simply studying language.

To improve your listening skills, you need to listen extensively. This means:

- you don't set out to understand everything
- you don't set out to learn every word
- you don't even necessarily analyse the language.

Your long-term aim needs to be to spend large amounts of time listening, because that's the only way you can spend enough time with the language to improve your ability to understand.

Laura says:

I like having a playlist of podcasts or radio shows that I listen to while driving or at the gym. Even if I don't understand everything, I get the gist, and that is motivating.

Why do people who move abroad often learn the language far faster than if they stayed at home?

The most basic answer to that question is that they simply get huge amounts of exposure by living in the country. They spend hour after hour listening to native speakers talking, whether in-person, on the street, or on the TV.

As a language learner, you need to ask yourself how much time you are actually spending listening to the language. If the only listening you do is in the classroom, as in the example given above, the amount of time you spend listening maybe very small.

Activity 7 Reflecting on your listening time
Allow about 10 minutes

How much time do you spend every week listening to your target language? Write an estimate in the box below, and a list of listening activities you do.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

What's more, the skills of speaking and listening are not mutually exclusive. When you listen, you learn. The new vocabulary, grammar or expressions you learn then filter directly through to your speaking.

Listening, therefore, is one of the best ways to become a better speaker. For this reason, listening is often considered to be the ultimate skill, and this is why I suggest it is the skill you devote as much time to as any other.

As we noted at the start of this week, when you started learning your target language, your dream was probably to 'speak fluently.' However, learning to speak fluently, and being able to hold a conversation, is dependent on your listening skills.

As an independent learner, you're in a position to say: 'Okay, I understand how important listening is, so I'm going to spend __% of my study time listening.'

If you take lessons with a teacher, or attend language classes in a school, you will expect to be *taught* during that time. You would question the value for money of the class if you spent large amounts of lesson time simply listening to recordings. 'We could just do this at home!' Of course, most people won't do it at home, and listening can easily be forgotten.

As an independent learner, this is the kind of question that can be a big factor in your success. It's also an advantage to independent learning – you're in control of your time.

5 What kind of material should you use?

There are generally two kinds of material you can use for language learning or practice:

1. authentic listening materials
2. graded listening materials.

An authentic listening is something that has been created for a native-speaker audience. A graded listening has been simplified for the benefit of learners of the language.

Activity 8 Authentic or graded?
Allow about 10 minutes

Listen to the following two excerpts. One is authentic, and one has been graded for intermediate level English learners. Which is which, and how is the language different between the two?

> Audio content is not available in this format.

> Audio content is not available in this format.

Arguments rage about whether authentic or graded material is best for language teaching, but for you, the important question is a different one: 'How can I get the most out of the listening activity?'

It is every language learner's dream to effortlessly understand films, or to hold in-depth conversations with like-minded people, all in their target language. However, the reality is that you won't be able to understand this kind of authentic language at first. During the early stages of learning a language, you will be reliant on simple, graded material in your textbook. You can then progress to simple audio or video, produced for language learners, and then eventually, when you move beyond the intermediate level, you can begin to work with authentic language intended for native speakers. (It's a big leap!) As you become more advanced in your learning, you should still regularly revisit and amend your SMART goals, so that you challenge yourself all the time.

Finding good material for listening practice (or reading, for that matter, as Fernando will explain in Week 7) is often a source of great difficulty for learners. 'It's either too easy or too hard!' is a common complaint.

Given that the most beneficial activity, I would say, is to do as much **extensive listening** as possible – which involves listening to substantial material – the best way to see the challenge is as follows:

'As a beginner, I will be getting my listening practice from textbooks and other beginners' resources. However, I will then need to progress to authentic material, so that I can spend more time listening.'

---

6 Listening study skills

Now that you're familiar with the key concepts of intensive/extensive listening, and graded/authentic audio, you will be more aware of how you're studying, and why different kinds of material or exercises may be harder or easier than others.

In this section, you'll look at practical recommendations for improving your listening skills.

Activity 9 Listening quiz
Allow about 5 minutes

As a beginner, I should be using:

○ graded audio

○ authentic audio

In the classroom, most listening activities are:

○ intensive listening

○ extensive listening

A movie is considered to be:

○ authentic audio

○ graded audio

The best way to develop listening skills is by:

○ extensive listening

○ intensive listening

It goes without saying that authentic material, such as movies or radio programmes, can be extremely challenging to understand, even for more advanced learners. This is why in Week 1 we talked so much about expectations, and making sure they are realistic. Now, here's the part where those expectations intersect with how you actually study.

Earlier, you saw how native speakers can follow difficult conversations, even when you can only hear half of the words. The lessons for you was that you can understand the main message, and follow along, without understanding every word.

Watch the following video in which Olly talks about a procedure for listening to audio material.

Video content is not available in this format.

7 Live listening skills

So far, you've been learning about study techniques.

But what about when you're travelling abroad or talking to a native speaker? How can you use your listening skills to survive in the heat of the moment?

Luckily, there are some powerful techniques that can help you get through a conversation, or understand a key piece of information, even when you're still a relative newbie in the language.

This will now be demonstrated by taking a typical travel scenario.

Video content is not available in this format.

Figure 4 Understanding just enough will get you far

Activity 10 Asking for clarification in English
Allow about 5 minutes

You can use exactly the same principle in conversations – listen for the key information you want. However, in conversations you have the huge advantage of being able to ask for clarification.

Asking for clarification is an important speaking skill, and happens all the time even with native speakers:

Listen to this typical conversation in English and note all the times clarification is required or asked for.

Audio content is not available in this format.

One of the most valuable things you can do is to learn three phrases to ask for clarification in your target language. So, if you are currently learning a language, find out three expressions or set phrases for asking for clarification, check their pronunciation, learn them and use them several times a day over the next week – even if you are just talking to yourself!

Video content is not available in this format.

8 Resources: listening materials, and where to find them

You will now think about the listening resources you could use and how to find them.

Activity 11 Doing your own research
Allow about 30 minutes

Go online and search for listening resources in your target language. You might want to specify your level in the search terms you use, so search for instance for 'Spanish listening practice for beginners' or 'German listening exercises B1'.

You will need to evaluate the resources you find, so don't forget about the framework that Fernando introduced you to in Week 3.

For listening resources, you might want to focus on the following criteria:

- Listening: does the resource provide audio in the target language?
- Pronunciation and intonation: does the resource offer specific activities for pronunciation and intonation?
- Language varieties: does the resource include different regional or national varieties of the language?

Discussion
Obviously it is difficult to provide feedback for this activity as every learner will look for something different, depending on their needs. It is important that you are critical about what you find, and decide if it is right for you, and the criteria we have provided can help you.

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9 This week's quiz

Well done – you have reached the end of Week 5 and can now take the weekly quiz to test your understanding.

Week 5 practice quiz

Open the quiz in a new tab or window (by holding ctrl [or cmd on a Mac] when you click the link) and come back here when you are done.

10 Summary of Week 5

This week you have looked at how to develop your listening skills as a beginner and then when you reach a more advanced level.

You should now be able to:

* understand what is involved in listening
* find out about the difference between intensive and extensive listening
* understand the different types of authentic and graded audio, and look for audio resources for yourself.

I mentioned earlier that one of the key things you must do when you start learning a new language is to grow your vocabulary. Next week Tita will cover this aspect of language learning in detail and show you some techniques for growing your vocabulary.

You can now go to Week 6.

Week 6: Vocabulary

Introduction

This week of the course is written by Tita Beaven.

Do you know how many words there are in English? And how many words there are in the language you want to learn? How many words do you need to know to speak a language? And what does it mean to know a word anyway?

Why is learning vocabulary important, and does the size of your vocabulary really matter that much? According to research, vocabulary size is one of the greatest predictors of both first and second language reading comprehension, and is a central aspect of second language learning. This week, you will start by looking at the above questions in a bit more detail. However, if you have tried learning a new language, you probably find remembering the vocabulary really tough, so this week I will also talk you through how your memory works, and you'll learn some memory techniques.

By the end of this week you will be able to:

- estimate the number of words you need to learn in a language
- differentiate between receptive and productive vocabulary
- engage with different strategies to remember new words
- engage with different ways to retrieve vocabulary you have learned.

1 How many words are there?

The answer to this question, of course, depends on how you define what a word is, and on how you count them.

Let's start with English. The extract below, from the Oxford English Dictionary blog, explains the difficulties in answering the question.

How many words are there in the English language?

There is no single sensible answer to this question. It's impossible to count the number of words in a language, because it's so hard to decide what actually counts as a word. Is dog one word, or two (a noun meaning 'a kind of animal', and a verb meaning 'to follow persistently')? If we count it as two, then do we count inflections separately too (e.g. dogs = plural noun, dogs = present tense of the verb). Is dog-tired a word, or just two other words joined together? Is hot dog really two words, since it might also be written as hot-dog or even hotdog?

It's also difficult to decide what counts as 'English'. What about medical and scientific terms? Latin words used in law, French words used in cooking, German words used in academic writing, Japanese words used in martial arts? Do you count Scots dialect? Teenage slang? Abbreviations?

English has over 171,000 dictionary entries for words in current use, and an estimated 250,000 distinct words. That is a lot of words to learn.

Activity 1 How many words are in your chosen language
Allow about 15 minutes

How many words are there in the language you want to learn?

Search online for an answer to this question, and make a note of the number of words in your other language as well as of any issues around how to count them in your particular language.

As you look for information, think about what you count as a word (i.e. do you include only dictionary headwords, or also inflected words?) And do you include vocabulary from the different language varieties of that language (Spanish, for instance, is spoken in Spain and in 19 countries in the Americas, as well as in Equatorial Guinea, and there are many words that are different in the different varieties of Spanish).

Discussion

So, now that you have an idea of how many words there are in English and in the language you are learning or want to learn, how many words do you think you need?

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2 How many words do you need?

You've just seen that there are an estimated 250,000 distinct words in English. Imagine you were learning English as a new language from scratch; if you wanted to learn even half the words in the language and set yourself the rather tall order of learning ten new words a day, it would take you over 30 years to achieve it. So what's going on?

Well, although there are an estimated 250,000 distinct words in English, a conservative estimate of how many words a well-educated native speaker knows suggest the figure is somewhere between 20,000 to 27,000 word-families (Goulden, Nation and Read, 1990; Zechmeister et al., 1995). Well, learning vocabulary at the same rate as before, that would take over 7 years – although remember that learning 10 new words a day, day in, day out, is a tall order, but 7 years seems more manageable, and if you studied intensively, or were able to immerse yourself in the language, it might be achievable.

Another way to estimate how many words a learner might need is to figure out the number of words needed to do what they would like or need to do in the language, such as dealing with spoken language when you go on holiday, reading newspapers or watching TV. Here, the research shows that a small number of word types occurs very frequently and makes up most of the words in spoken or written text. The table below show how the most frequent 1000 word families account for over three-quarters of the words in text. The next two frequency bands (so a vocabulary of 3000 word families) account for nearly 90 per cent of the words in these texts and then the effect decreases, so increasing your vocabulary beyond that makes very little difference to the texts you can understand.

Table 1 Frequency bands

Frequency band	Example words	% Coverage added by level	Cumulative %
1,000	the, history	77.86	77.86
2,000	accommodate, prefer	8.23	86.09
3,000	digest, receipt	3.70	89.16
4,000	elastic, thread	1.79	90.95
5,000	locker, tranquil	1.04	91.99
6,000	diligent, undertake	0.70	92.69
7,000	fossil, jagged	0.65	93.34
8,000	abhor, obtrusive	0.40	93.74
9,000	remorse, wrench	0.32	94.06
10,000	barricade, pigment	0.32	94.38
11,000	glitzy, scam	0.16	94.54
12,000	epitome, resonate	0.14	94.68
13,000	outdo, tipsy	0.12	94.80
14,000	secede, yearbook	0.10	94.90

(Source: Schmitt and Schmitt, 2014, figures courtesy of Mark Davies.)

Vocabulary size and text coverage for the written LOB Corpus (1,000–14,000 levels) (in Schmitt and Schmitt, 2014, adapted from Nation, 2006, p. 64) – the LOB corpus is a collection of one million words from different UK written sources.

So vocabulary acquisition research shows that knowing the most common 1000 or so word families is sufficient to understand over 75 per cent of texts. All of a sudden, the task seems a bit less daunting!

So, how do you find out which 1000 words to start with? You can get a frequency dictionary in the language you are learning, or do an online search for 'the 1000 most common words in (+ your target language)'.

However, you might also want to combine learning the most frequent words in the language with words that are useful to you personally. So for instance, the word *stieftochter* (stepdaughter) in German doesn't even appear in my *Frequency Dictionary of German*, which includes the most common 4000 words, and yet, as I happen to have one, I made sure I learned it very early on, so I could talk about both my *tochter* and my *steiftochter* when I talked about my family in German.

3 What does it mean to know a word?

OK, so let's say that you set yourself the target of learning 1000 words in your target language to start with. The next question you might ask yourself is: what does it mean to 'know' a word? You will look at this in the next section.

3.1 Receptive and productive vocabulary

If you understand the meaning of a word when you hear it or read it, it is part of your receptive vocabulary. Words in this category range from those you know well, to those you barely know but can understand when you come across them because of the context, for instance. If you are able to produce a word when speaking or writing in a way that is appropriate and that matched what you mean, this is part of your productive vocabulary. Usually, your receptive vocabulary is greater than your productive vocabulary.

I remember in a French class I was teaching years ago, a student was writing a description of her town, and asked me how you say 'park' in French. I asked her to look it up in the dictionary, and when I checked later what she had written, it was something like:

> Dans ma ville il y a un **garer** très joli.

The problem with this sentence is that 'garer' means 'park', as in 'to park your car'. So the student was saying that in her town there is a very beautiful to park. This, of course, doesn't make sense, either in terms of meaning, or grammatically. She had looked up the word in the dictionary, but she had not paid attention to any of the specific features of the word she was looking up, or the information she was finding in the dictionary. So, knowing a word is about understanding what that word means, how it is used, and indeed, how you can use it.

3.2 Depth of knowledge

As well as breadth of vocabulary (or size) a useful concept when thinking about vocabulary knowledge, both with words in your receptive and in your productive vocabulary, is *depth* of knowledge. Match the different aspects of what it means to know a word with their definition (based on Qian, 1999).

Activity 2 Depth of word knowledge matching activity
Allow about 5 minutes

The following relate to different aspects of depth of knowledge of words. Match each one with their meaning:

how different forms of the word are pronounced and spelled

the forms a word can take (inflection, derivation, etc.) and its possible parts of speech (so whether it can be a noun or a verb, as in the case of 'park' above)

the word's possible positions in a sentence (such as whether an adjective goes before or after the noun)

what a word means in context, but also its connotations, as well as whether it might mean different things in different contexts (e.g. the word 'crane' can mean a type of bird, a type of construction equipment or something unpleasant you do to your neck!). Also, what its common synonyms and antonyms are.

is the word use in particular situations (formal or informal, for instance) or in particular regional varieties?

is the word commonly used or one that appears only in some specialised texts

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Pronunciation and spelling

Morphological properties

Syntactic properties

Meaning

Register, or discourse features

Frequency

So, when you learn vocabulary, it is important that you think about what it means to know a word, and that you pay attention to the features we have just highlighted. And when you buy a dictionary (or chose one online), have a look at how much 'depth of knowledge' about the words it provides.

3.3 Vocabulary learning strategies

There are lots of different techniques for learning vocabulary, ranging from keeping a vocabulary book to writing a word repeatedly or saying it to yourself.

The following activity will enable you to find out which strategies you use most often, but also point out other strategies that you might not use but are worth trying out.

Activity 3 Vocabulary strategies
Allow about 10 minutes

Add your answers to the statements in the table.

	Often/ Sometimes/ Not very often/ Never
I use my background knowledge/the wider context to guess the meaning of new words.	*Provide your answer...*
I look for any definitions or paraphrases in the passage that support my guess about the meaning of a word.	*Provide your answer...*
When I see an unfamiliar word again and again, I look it up.	*Provide your answer...*
When I want to confirm my guess about a word, I look it up.	*Provide your answer...*

I pay attention to the examples of use when I look up a word in a dictionary.	*Provide your answer...*
I look for phrases or set expressions that go with the word I look up.	*Provide your answer...*
I look for phrases or set expressions that go with the word I look up.	*Provide your answer...*
I make a note if I think the word I'm looking up is relevant to my interest.	*Provide your answer...*
I put synonyms or antonyms together in my notebook.	*Provide your answer...*
I make a note when I see a useful expression or phrase.	*Provide your answer...*
I make vocabulary lists of new words that I want to learn.	*Provide your answer...*
I make online vocabulary flashcards with the new words that I want to learn.	*Provide your answer...*
When I try to remember a word, I repeat it aloud to myself.	*Provide your answer...*
When I try to remember a word, I write it repeatedly.	*Provide your answer...*
I group words into categories when I write them down.	*Provide your answer...*
I deliberately read texts in my areas of interest so that I can find out and remember the special terminology that I need to know.	*Provide your answer...*
I try to read as much as possible so that I can make use of the words I am trying to remember.	*Provide your answer...*
I use the words I am trying to learn in writing or when I speak.	*Provide your answer...*
I try to use words I am learning in imaginary situations in my mind.	*Provide your answer...*

4 Your memory – or how to cope with so many words

One of the things that students often tell me when they start to learn a language is that there are so many new words to memorise, it can feel overwhelming. And not just that, but when you have learned some vocabulary and you open your mouth to speak, all of a sudden your mind goes blank and you can't remember how to say anything.
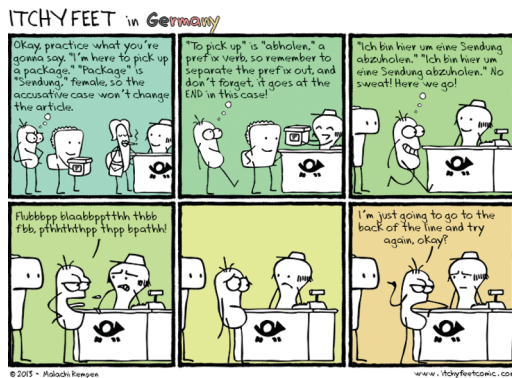
Figure 1 Learning German.

So what are the strategies to learn vocabulary (and everything else)? Allow me to take a little detour to explain what is going on in your mind when you try to learn vocabulary.

As humans, we are very good at processing information. Research into memory, cognition and thinking has sought to understand how we process information, and one important model that has emerged is the information processing model (IPM). According to this model, there are three types of memory: sensory memory, working memory, and long-term memory (Schraw and McCrudden, 2009).

Watch this short video about sensory, working and long term memory.

View at: youtube:pMMRE4Q2FGk

So, in what way is this important when learning languages, and more specifically, when learning vocabulary? The information that you receive through your sensory memory is usually processed too quickly for you to consciously control. After information enters your sensory memory, it is either almost immediately deleted from the system, or it is forwarded to your working memory. This is where information is processed, or assigned meaning. The processed information is then either transferred to your long-term memory though some sort of mental rehearsal process, or deleted if it's no longer needed. Unlike your working memory, your long-term memory is more or less unlimited (Schraw and McCrudden, 2009).

What you are trying to do when learning a language is to process the visual and verbal information that you come across and to transfer it to your long-term memory. In order to be a successful learner, you need to do several things:

- As what you can hold in your short-term memory is very limited, you need to make sure you use those limited cognitive resources efficiently. Effective learners use processing strategies such as organisation (i.e. how the information is stored in long-

term memory), inference (or making connections between separate concepts) and elaboration (or connecting new information to things you already know). We will return to those shortly.

- Ideally, you want to achieve automaticity in much of what you do in your new language. Automaticity is about being able to perform a task quickly and efficiently, and this is achieved through repeated practice. When you are first learning to drive, you have to perform a series of complex processes that feel almost impossible to achieve. When you have learnt to drive, you can perform the same series of complex activities without even noticing, because you have achieved automaticity. It is exactly the same with learning a language. At the beginning, you might be hesitant when responding to a simple greeting, trying to remember the correct formula to use, the pronunciation, or the specific grammatical construction you need to address, for instance, a stranger rather than a friend. It might all feel very halting. When you become more proficient, you do this automatically, almost without thinking.

- Finally, you also want to be able to focus your limited cognitive resources on what is really important for the task you are doing. So if you are at a busy airport and need to find out the gate for your plane to Manchester, you need to pay attention to the announcements and listen for the key word 'Manchester' – paying attention to who is coming and going in the airport, for instance, will only be a distraction. On the other hand, if you were waiting for someone at the airport, you would have to pay attention to the people around you rather than the announcements or any other irrelevant information. This selective processing is in fact what also characterises successful learners: you need to be able to identify the most important things to learn and use your limited cognitive resources to learn that.

Information needs to be encoded into your long-term memory, and it also needs to be retrieved when it is needed. Encoding refers to the strategies that move the information from your short-term memory to your long-term memory. Retrieval processes, on the other hand, are those that enable you to search your memory and access the information in your long-term memory.

All this might seem a little abstract, so let's look at what it means in practice.

5 Common strategies that don't work

One very commonly used strategy when you want to remember something (such as a telephone number, or a postcode, for instance, but also a word you've just learned in a new language) is to repeat it over and over again. While that strategy might work in the short term, it is not very likely that, on its own, it will be enough for you to be able to remember that piece of information in the long term.

It might surprise you that there are other commonly used strategies, such as highlighting or underlining important phrases or sentences in a text, that have also been shown to be ineffective learning strategies if your aim is to remember the information. One of the reasons why these strategies don't work as well as others is that, in order to encode information into your long-term memory, you should engage in activities that are effortful. It is by making the effort that you remember better.

6 Effortful encoding strategies

So, what sort of effortful encoding strategies are we talking about? You will now look at the following useful effortful encoding strategies that will help you learn vocabulary:

- chunking
- mnemonics
- memory palaces
- self-referencing
- spacing.

6.1 Chunking

The first one is chunking, or grouping the information into meaningful units.

Listen to the following sequence of numbers. Don't write them down.

Audio content is not available in this format.

The reason why you can probably remember the second sequence, and not the first, is because you were able to chunk the information into meaningful bits of information, and that you could relate those numbers to categories you already had in your long-term memory – key dates in UK history.

When learning vocabulary, it is a lot easier to remember vocabulary items in categories that you already understand.

So for instance, it is easier to remember:

Oranges, bananas, pears

Chicken, ham, soya beans

Rice, pasta, bread

than it is to remember those same words in this sequence:

Oranges, ham, pears, bread, rice, soya beans, chicken, pasta, bananas

The reason for that is that while the second list is in a totally arbitrary order, in the first one the items are grouped into categories that you are already familiar with (fruit, protein, carbs). So when you are learning lists of vocabulary in a foreign language, don't just learn words in a random order, but put them into meaningful categories and that will help encode them into your long-term memory. You can do this, for instance, in a table or in a mind-map.

Fruit	Protein	Carbohydrates
- Oranges - Bananas - Pears	- Chicken - Ham - Soya beans	- Rice - Pasta - Bread

Figure 2 A way to categorise items.

Figure 3 Another way to categorise items.

6.2 Mnemonics

A second important encoding strategy is mnemonics. You probably learned some mnemonics at school. For instance, to learn the colours of the rainbow, you can remember the sentence: Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet), or to remember the order of the planets in our solar system, you can use the mnemonic: My Very Easy Method Just Speeds Up Naming Planets (the first one, closest to the Sun, is Mercury).

Although most people associate mnemonics with this sort of examples, mnemonics are indeed any sort of memory technique that helps retain information.

One useful mnemonic device is the use of **imagery**, and this can be very useful when learning new vocabulary.

Vocabulary cards or 'flashcards' are a useful way to learn vocabulary. They are cards that have the word you want to learn on one side and, usually, the translation of the word on the other. There are also flashcard apps you can use online, and you'll review these in Week 8.
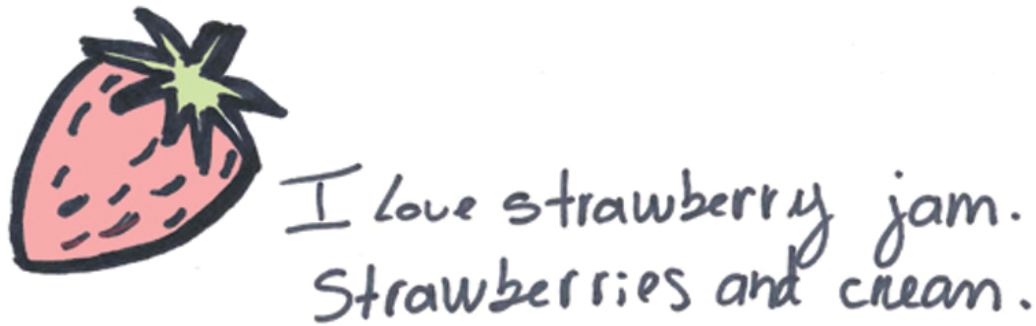
I love strawberry jam.
Strawberries and cream.

Figure 4 A flashcard.

Una fresa.
Me gusta mucho la
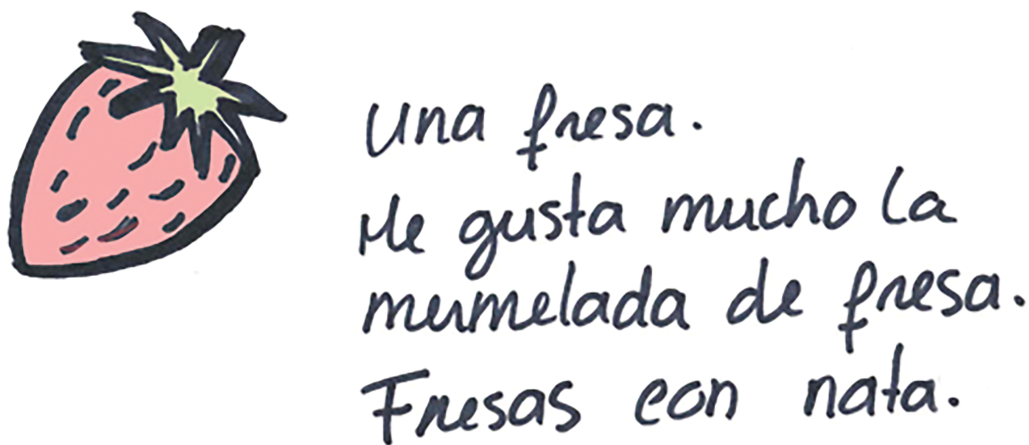mermelada de fresa.
Fresas con nata.

Figure 5 The reverse of the flashcard.

Instead of having the word you want to learn on one side and the translation on the other, you can use vocabulary cards that have the word you want to learn on one side, and a picture on the other. And although you can find lots of these already made, it seems that if you actually spend a bit of time and make them yourself, with images that are either meaningful to you, or that you look for yourself, you are more likely to remember them (Wyner, 2014).

So here, for instance, is a card I made to learn the verb können (can) in German.

The front of the card show a sentence with a gap (Laura …. play the piano) in it and a picture, and the back contains the whole sentence, and the infinitive of the verb. What

makes this card particularly meaningful to me is that Laura is my daughter, and that the piano in the picture is Laura's piano. All this helps to encode the German into my long-term memory, because the new information can latch onto lots of other meaningful items that are in my memory already.