



BENNY LEWIS

**THE NO-
< NONSENSE
GUIDE TO
LANGUAGE >
LEARNING**



 **FLUENT** in
3 MONTHS

The No-Nonsense Guide to Language Learning

Hacks and Tips to Learn a Language Faster

Benny Lewis

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Produced in the United States of America.

First Edition.

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Introduction: Is It Possible to Become Fluent in a Language in 3 Months?



I'm Benny Lewis, a fun-loving Irish guy, full-time globe trotter and international bestselling author.

Since 2003, I've become a fluent speaker of seven languages. And I'm able to have confident conversations in many others.

With my no-nonsense approach to language learning, I help people just like you to feel confident in speaking another language, even if they've only just started. My mission in life is *giving people permission to make mistakes*. The more mistakes you make, the faster you become a confident language learner.

Thousands of language learners have been successful with my approach, and I'd like to share it with you, too.

Over the years I have picked up quite a lot of **short-cuts, memory techniques**, and a pretty good mentality that has hugely helped me to learn seven languages, and earn the title of "polyglot".

I insist that learning a language is something that anyone can do. I am not naturally linguistically talented (or at least, no more so than your average Joe); I had very poor grades for languages in school (and studied *Electronic Engineering* at university) and I only started speaking non-English languages at 21. Nevertheless, I have definitely learned that it's a lot easier than most people think.

Once I found out how easy it is to learn languages, I started travelling to new countries and staying there (for around 3 months usually) and immersing myself in the language. Three months isn't a long time, so it forced me, through trial and error, to look for as many different ways to speed up my learning as possible. That's how I discovered hacks for learning languages quickly.

The language hacks I discovered can just as easily be used in the comfort of your own home – no matter where you call home – with the right tools and attitude.

What's my understanding of fluency? I call myself fluent when I'm able to have comfortable conversations with locals about a wide range of topics without a strong accent. I expect myself to have a good enough command of the language for expressing myself clearly in many social situations, while understanding as much as possible of what other people are saying. We'll get into what fluency means at a deeper level soon enough though.

I reached this level of fluency without having my head in books for months, or paying huge fees for courses. Most importantly, I have a lot of fun along the way.

I know that my techniques work for any language, because I've used them so many times, and I get hundreds of emails, tweets, hashtagged YouTube videos and other messages every week from people who have applied my advice to their own language learning projects.

If you'd like to see how it's done, read on. I'd like to start by sharing my language-learning story.

Before we begin, a couple of quick pointers to help you get the most from this book.

First, this book is a collection of some of my best articles on learning a language. I've updated them, improved them and rewritten them to flow naturally from one idea to the next, so you can gradually learn my approach. Sometimes you'll find that I repeat a point I made previously. Hopefully this will embed the most important ideas into your memory and help the *language hacker's mindset* become part of your life.

Second, throughout this book I mention different language learning resources, such as italki, my *Speak in a Week* course, Innovative Language podcasts, and the Add1Challenge. I'm certain you'll find these helpful on your own language learning journey. You can find out more about these resources – including the links you need to access them – in the [Resources section](#) at the end of the book.

Let's get started!

Chapter 1: Why My Destiny Was to Never Speak Spanish (and How I Did it Anyway)

It's easy to look at someone who already speaks a second language and just think that it comes *naturally* to them.

If you've seen me speaking fluent Spanish with my friends, you might think that speaking Spanish was just my *destiny*. You might believe that I'm "naturally talented" with languages and the pieces of the puzzle just always fit together to make sure that my life would go in this direction.

Utter nonsense!

In fact my "destiny" was to never speak Spanish. The universe told me in very clear ways, many times, that it just was not my path. My stars were aligned, my luck was forged and the fates had decided that I'd be good at mathematics and computers, but *not* languages.

If you think I'm exaggerating, please read on. The *destiny* excuse comes in many forms: "it's just not meant to be", "it's genetic", "no matter how hard I try, I'll never be able to do it".

None of those excuses needs to be true for you.

How can I be sure of this?

I want to share with you *some* of the "signs" that the universe was giving me for many many years.

It's important to share this because I know many of you have your own struggles and it can actually be demotivating to think that some people "have it easy". Trust me, I did *not* have it easy.

Not the best start: Speech therapy

I don't smoke, I eat healthily and I don't drink. A big reason behind these decisions is that I spent the first years of my life very sick and was admitted to hospital for some time. Now that I'm in good health I don't want to squander it.

One unfortunate consequence of my health problems was that I developed a difficulty speaking.

It was so bad that I needed speech therapy – I had particular problems with my R (not the rolling one, just the standard English one). My big brother still teases me that my favourite TV show was "Stah Tweek".

The consequences of this still linger somewhat – since I learned to speak a little slower and had to get private lessons to do it (which were obviously tailored towards speaking as correctly as possible), my English was not as natural as it was for others around me so I don't have a *very* strong accent of where I'm from. People never guess that I'm from the part of Ireland I am from (Cavan), and foreigners tell me that I speak English in a way that's easy for them to understand.

Having a delay in starting to speak English well was *not* a good prerequisite for speaking other languages!

When I'm speaking English, I still have to think a bit more than most people would. And speaking still doesn't feel *that* natural. So no, I'm not *talented with languages*.

I gave up trying in my teens

Even though my interest in languages really took off in my early 20s, I was actually genuinely curious about speaking Spanish in my teens! A group of students from the Canary Islands came to spend July in my town several years in a row and I got really friendly with them. They loved me – my English was the easiest to understand in town without me even trying!

But, as many people do when abroad with those from their homeland, they spoke a lot of their mother tongue with one another. I tried to ask what something meant, and even printed out the “La Macarena” lyrics to speak it aloud to them. But they were having none of it! They had travelled a long way and their parents had paid quite a lot to have them immersed in English, so they'd *at least* do that with the locals all the time. My purpose among them socially was made clear and any attempt to learn a word or two of Spanish was met with “don't be silly” retorts.

Obviously I gave up trying – what was the point in learning a language if my feeble attempts were just going to annoy them? I spent four or five summers with them, but never learned more than “hola” and wouldn't even dare try saying *that* to them.

The academic conspiracy; if at first you don't succeed, fail, fail and fail again

In Ireland (at least while I was in school) you have to have studied a third language (the first two being English and Irish) to get into university. Making a choice was easy in my school – it's not like they were offering the exotic characters of Chinese, or the musicality of Italian – it was French or German. Like it or lump it.

I actually went out of my way to ask if I could possibly take Spanish? Not a hope – we didn't have a Spanish teacher in my school. **German** it was. I managed to get a C grade, but then the first time I went to Germany I wasn't even able to ask directions (the one thing we HAD done repetitively over and over again in German classes!).

My abysmal results in German just reinforced the idea that this whole languages thing *really wasn't for me*.

But I had another chance! We don't have “majors” and “minors” in Irish universities, but mine offered free evening classes in languages, and Spanish was available!

Every year I went to the cultural talk that tried to encourage people to take on this optional Spanish class, and I was the **first** to hand in my application every time. I didn't need convincing, but that was where you had to apply.

And every year, **they didn't accept me**. The class filled up too quickly and there were no slots left. The first time I got turned down I was just annoyed and accepted it. By my third year I was determined and despite getting turned down again, I actually went to that first class and begged the teacher to let me in. I could see an empty seat!

But rules are rules and I wasn't on the list. I presumed the random way they selected people just happened to not be in my favour at all, but when I went to the person who ran the cultural talk and asked them why I get turned down every time their answer was something that changed my view of "fair" forever: they simply took the first 15 (or whatever number it was) people in the stack of paper. Since I handed mine in *first* I was at the *bottom* of the stack.

My enthusiasm was actually the reason I wasn't getting into the classes!

Lesson learned: stop being enthusiastic and give up. Universe 1, Benny 0.

Finally in Spain! But don't think it's going to be that easy!

I didn't give up *entirely* though – I just waited until the end of my studies and applied for an internship for the summer after graduation. I had been working so hard to pass one of Ireland's most demanding university courses (with an incredibly high failure rate) that I felt I deserved a nice fun summer, so going to sunny Spain for the first time seemed like the logical choice.

I spent a few days flicking through a Spanish course, convinced that this preparation would have me at least muttering the basics when I arrived. But I wasn't expecting the expat bubble to be so strong!

An English-speaking Spaniard greeted me in the airport and brought me to an apartment with an English-speaking Brazilian and German. Our work exchange program had people from all over the world and they were my social group. English was the language spoken where I worked and when I went out.

I was starting to get the impression that nobody in the world ever speaks *any* language but English. All I could see and hear was English – sure the signs and products and TV were in Spanish, and strangers passing by spoke Spanish, but all my friends spoke English, that's all that matters *really!*

This is a trap that so many expats fall into it makes me sad. But it's actually bound to happen – why learn another language if it was just *not meant to be*? You were born language-stupid, just accept it! That's what I was tempted to think.

I considered taking on Spanish a few times over the months though – I signed up for a pretty expensive course for a few classes – throwing money at the problem was bound to solve it!

But I was the worst in the class. I felt worse after each hour as the other students answered whatever noise the teacher was making. All I could offer were blank faces when asked *¿Blah blah **blah** blah blah?* After several attempts I was getting nowhere, and everyone else laughing and enjoying the class was just making me jealous and frustrated. It was time to give up... again.

Six months living in Spain and I still couldn't muster together a basic sentence in Spanish.

Destiny is all in your head

At 21 years old, with this background, how clear do you think “the message” was that it was just not meant to be? At this stage I could offer you many reasons why I would *never* speak Spanish. It was so tempting that I kept believing it for a time and my mind would be fixed on that idea.

But I had one trick up my sleeve that “bad genes”, speaking problems, unhelpful schools, discouraging natives, endless “signs” from the universe and frustrating irony could not knock:

I don’t believe in destiny.

I don’t buy that crap for one second. Destiny may sound pretty and romantic when talking about how couples were meant to be together, but its other forms (the modern one being a messed-up understanding of genetics) are excuses and unverified **self-fulfilling prophecies**.

If you believe strongly that you are bad at languages, *then that will be true*. It doesn’t matter *which* excuse you have randomly plucked out of the air – your commitment to it will make the claim true. Most of my work in trying to get through to people in my books, on my blog and in my videos doesn’t involve giving amazing language learning “tricks”, but to **break** that commitment.

I don’t care **who** you are – there is *nothing* stopping you from taking on the language learning challenge and succeeding. Yes, you may have to go through hard times, struggles and incredible resistance, as I did, but with persistence you will find a way that works for you.

Nothing I have said in this post “proves” that my destiny was to not speak Spanish. It just shows that the things I was doing at the time were not getting me there. *So I tried something else*. I didn’t want it enough at first, so I waited several years between attempts, but when I got serious about it, things changed dramatically.

Persistence wins over destiny

Experimentation will yield results, both positive and negative. You can give up after experiment #1 turns out negative, or you can come out on top after experiment #37.

All you *really* know from success stories is what the victor decides to tell you. People who achieve hard goals do it from being positive rather than whining constantly about their task. Because of that you get a filtered version of stories that leaves out the worst parts. Why include those details? They weren’t relevant to success.

So stop complaining about how easy everyone else has it! I assure you, if you really ask people who seem to sail through life and stumble upon goals you’d kill for, you may just see that they have had setbacks much bigger than anything you could have dreamed up.

Sometimes success is actually due to being stubborn enough to ignore all the “signs” from the universe and to **make your own destiny**.

How did I make my own destiny and become fluent in Spanish? That’s what I’ll share in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: The Smartest Decision I Ever Made

OK, so now I'd like to share the most important decision I have ever made in learning languages.

This choice was the first step in my transformation from a hopeless "I'm not talented with languages" person into the polyglot that I am today. The change happened in one day: November 1st, 2003.

If it wasn't for that one decision I would have given up with my first foreign language, and all later ones, and all of the wonderful experiences of the last decade and a half wouldn't have been possible.

Let me explain...

Months of work and still not speaking

I had spent almost 6 months in Valencia, Spain. I loved the people, the fiestas, and life in general there. I wanted to stay longer, and I **really** wanted to speak Spanish.

I was trying so hard! I was studying every day, I even tried expensive courses for a short time, and I was speaking it every chance I got; in the supermarket, at parties with strangers I met, after giving an English class to a child I tried conversing with the parents, etc.

But I still couldn't actually speak Spanish.

I was just struggling with repeating the same words and phrases over and over. I didn't get it! I really wanted it; I was motivated! I was working hard. Surely after 6 months I should have been speaking much better than I already was?

I would go to my English-speaking friends, and my Spanish friends with good English, because I could properly express myself with them and let off some steam. I would say how maybe Spanish is just too hard for me. Other foreigners were also having the same problem, and yet a few others were inexplicably picking up the language with apparently little work.

I thought to myself: "Maybe we're just not the kind of people who will ever pick up languages quickly."

Then I realized something! In a great Eureka moment, I saw both the problem, and the solution. It's so obvious and yet many people still don't actually get it.

The solution: Speak the target language!

This may seem like a pointless statement as I was living overseas. Surely I wasn't speaking much English anyway and was mostly using Spanish?

I'm afraid not. And it wasn't just me. Unfortunately, I have seen the following pattern hundreds of times.

Expats hang out with other English-speaking expats and complain about how hard the local language is, or talk about life in general *in English*. They chat to their boyfriend / girlfriend / friends *in English*. All of the local friends they have also talk to them *in English*. They only actually use the local language when they have to; English becomes the language they socialise and relax in most of the time.

I have met some English speakers who have lived abroad for up to ten years, and after just a few weeks I already spoke the local language better than they did. This does not make me feel smart; it makes me feel sad and frustrated for them. And I will meet more people like this in other travels who will look at me like I just have some special gene for languages or something.

Let me say it again: **I did poorly in languages in school, and when I was 21 years old, the only language that I spoke was English.** Up until then, I was just your average frustrated language learner.

These people that I keep meeting don't realise that their English-speaking social circle is protecting them from ever speaking the local language. They already have enough of the local language to get by, so why would they need more?

My plan: A very difficult and frustrating month in exchange for the best years of my life

So the decision that I finally made that changed everything was to stop using English entirely and “speak from day one” of my new project in Spanish. I made it my cardinal rule that I would absolutely avoid English whenever I was in Spanish mode. I'd use English in my work, since I was a part-time English teacher, and for weekly phone calls to my parents. Every other second of my life was to be in Spanish.

I couldn't conjugate any past-tense verbs, my vocabulary was super limited and my pronunciation was extremely English, but I decided not to care anymore. For the moment, I'd use the present tense and wave behind me or emphasise “*ayer*” (yesterday) to try to make it clearer, and I'd use the few words I knew to explain around what I wanted to say. Of course I used a lot of hand waving and gestures until people got what I was trying to say.

I decided that for exactly 30 days, (the entire month of November) I would speak hours of Spanish every day. I warned all of my friends who spoke Spanish in advance that I'd be making the switch, and did some final cramming of words and grammar and then one of the most mentally-draining months of my life began.

Frankly, it was horrible.

I couldn't ask for simple items because I always refused to just say the word in English when the other person would likely know, I couldn't have a discussion about anything important, so I was as good as a 5 year old for conversations (actually worse), and I couldn't even express my frustration to the people close to me.

It was also exasperating for those who kept insisting that I just say what I wanted to say in English.

Most of all, it was exhausting. At the end of the day I'd come home tired and frustrated. Anyone learning a language through full immersion knows what this feels like, but imagine

not being able to rely on those English-speaking hours for support and to relax! There were many times when I just considered abandoning the plan so I could express myself properly, but I didn't give in.

The end of the month came, and you know what? I wasn't speaking fluently. I still had horrible grammar and a strong accent, but over that month, something eventually clicked in my mind. I didn't *really* need English. It was indeed possible to communicate in the language, *even if I don't speak it well*.

Despite the frustration and the need to be able to communicate like a literate adult, I actually felt *good* about being able to express myself, albeit with limits, in Spanish. And even though I hadn't reached fluency, I was speaking **much** better than I was at the beginning of the experiment. I had learned so much because **my motive changed from "I really want to speak Spanish" to "I really need to speak Spanish"!** This is an extremely important difference.

By December I had made new friends who *didn't* speak any English at all. I decided to continue the experiment a little longer... and it actually turned into a new lifestyle!

Time to make a tough decision!

This method continued to this day for me and I still make it clear when I meet people what language I prefer to speak to them in. As a result, I now have Brazilian, Italian, Argentinian, Spanish, French and Quebecois friends, among many others.

This has greatly expanded my cultural horizons and given me a much more authentic experience in the various places I've lived..

If you are truly serious about learning a language to fluency as soon as possible, then I encourage you to make a similar decision.

If you are new in a country, or about to move there, then decide right now that you will very simply *avoid* speaking English, even if you have to avoid English speakers themselves. And stick with the decision. Ideally, you can still hang out with the English speakers, but you should all practise the local language instead of speaking English, no matter how weird it seems, or how tempted you are to just use your own common language.

What if you currently don't live abroad?

You can adopt this immersion approach to language learning even if you're living in an English-speaking country. You can do this by speaking your new language from day one, even if that's via the Internet.

With that in mind, let's take a look at what it means to be fluent in a language.

Chapter 3: How to Learn a New Language Fluently

What is fluency? What does it mean to be fluent in a language?

Believe it or not, this may be *the* most important question you ask yourself, if your goal is to speak another language.

Why is this?

Because the way you understand fluency could set you up for failure, and mean you'd never reach your language goals.

Or it could mean you become fluent in multiple languages in just a few years.

Let's take a look at why that is...

What does it mean to be fluent in another language?

I consider myself fluent in seven different languages, and reached various levels of proficiency in many others over the years. Some I learnt in order to make the most of my travels – others were for a challenge or simply, fun!

To me, fluency is being able to function in social situations in my target language, as I would in my native language.

This is consistent with the “official” definitions of fluent. The Oxford English dictionary defines fluent as “Able to express oneself easily and articulately,” and “(of a foreign language) spoken accurately and with facility.” The Merriam-Webster dictionary gives a similar definition.

You'll notice that the definition is *not* “Able to express oneself with flawless grammar,” or “(of a foreign language) spoken like a native speaker.” I'm not sure when the popular definition of “fluent” became synonymous with “perfection”, but this is not the case. You don't need to be perfect in order to be fluent.

To reach fluency, I aim to be confident in using around 2,000 words, together with a broader base of vocabulary that I'm less confident in using, but can understand in context. This means I understand 90-95% of the language in everyday situations. I have gone way beyond this stage in some of my languages, and would call that level of professional proficiency *mastery*, but I wanted to be clear on what counts as fluency, since it's really a much more practical goal than most people think.

Even when I've reached fluency as I understand it, I know I'm going to make mistakes. I am human, after all! As long as I have reached the level where I am able to get my point across, so that whoever I am conversing with understands what I am trying to communicate, I know I am almost, if not *completely* fluent in that language.

So if fluency is a relatively simple goal, why do so many people fail to reach even this level in a language?

Partly it's due to study methods. Many language learners seem to expect that if they spend enough time studying textbooks or watching foreign films, they'll somehow magically become fluent in their target language. I'm sorry, but this is not how it works.

How to make sure you reach fluency

Fluency is a “chicken and egg” scenario. If you wait until you're fluent before you speak a language, you'll *never* be fluent.

That's why I advocate speaking from day one.

I struggle to understand why so many people wait until the ‘perfect moment’ to start speaking a language. So many language learners seem to believe they can clock hours and hours of textbook study, then one day open their mouths and be able to have complex conversations about life, the universe and everything.

How to speak from day one

You can't just sit at a desk, or on your couch, somehow magically absorbing information and expect that to get you anywhere. The best way to learn a language is by taking action. Open up your mouth and start speaking!

Remember this: communication in any language is riddled with mistakes. Even your native language. English is my native tongue – yet it is not my favourite language to converse in, by any means! I sometimes stumble over pronunciations and use ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ as I find the correct way to phrase my thoughts. This is coming from someone who speaks publicly for a living!

You might be thinking *this is all very well and good Benny, but how exactly can I start speaking right now?*

You'll need two things:

1. A willingness to make mistakes.
2. Tools to connect with native speakers (we'll look at those later in this book)

Adopting a mindset where you allow yourself to make mistakes is critical – in fact I'd go as far as to say it's the only way to reach fluency.

There's no such thing as perfect

Being an engineer, I always fancied myself as a mathematician, rather than a writer. When I first started my website *Fluent in 3 Months (FI3M)*, I didn't really have a clear idea of what I was doing. I'd publish long blog posts – about my travels as well as my language-learning missions. Some of my posts had grammatical errors or mistakes, as I was the only one proofreading them. These days, there are guides all over the Internet on how to write blog posts, or draw in an audience. Well, I didn't use many photographs and I was very fond of emoticons (and I still am! :P).

I wasn't perfect (I'm still not), and I didn't let this bother me.

Perfection was never the goal for me. With multiple languages already under my belt, I wanted to share what I had learned, how I learned it, and, most of all, I wanted to tell stories.

I kept publishing far-from-perfect blog posts, and over the years, I built up a community and a business around *F/3M*. I wrote language guides, and even became an international best-selling author and National Geographic traveller of the year based on my writings!

Life isn't perfect. If you're going to sit around, waiting for an opportune moment to start doing all the things you want to do in life, you'll find you have very little chance of achieving, well – anything!

Imagine if I'd waited for that “perfect” moment to start up a blog. If I'd thought my articles weren't “good” enough to post online. If I'd effectively, been paralysed by a quest for perfectionism.

I think my life would have turned out *very* differently.

There are people who walk through life, waiting for the right time to do whatever it is they wish to achieve. This isn't limited to learning a language. Maybe they want to write a book, do a woodworking course or backpack around the world. They convince themselves that they don't have the time, means or money to do whatever it is they wish to do. And they leave it at that.

This is crazy, if you ask me! Our lives on this planet are so inconceivably short and people so often prioritise the wrong things. If you're incredibly lucky, your life will stretch to a length of 70+ years – imagine all the things you can learn in that time, if you put your mind to it.

The point is that the road to fluency is one that will always be riddled with mistakes. Mistakes are the only way to become a better learner and more confident speaker.

Mistakes work wonders for your self confidence

Many people are *terrified* to speak their target language. My partner Lauren was so nervous before her first Esperanto conversation via Skype that she hoped for a power outage so it would be cancelled.

Feeling fear is normal.

When you first start speaking a new language, you're going to be at a very basic level. Your vocabulary will be limited. You'll probably speak slowly. You'll hesitate. And you'll feel a bit silly.

That's totally okay.

Yes, none of us wants others to think of us as stupid. But speaking another language is a *smart* decision, not a stupid one.

In any case, how exactly will people think you're stupid? Many folk (at least in the English-speaking world) consider those who can speak multiple languages to be vastly intelligent. In most cases, if you're trying to learn a new language and make a mistake, people *won't* mock you or call you names. In fact, I've found people to be largely helpful – correcting your mistakes for you with kindness and even complimenting you.

The more mistakes you make, the more confident you'll become in your abilities as you make those same mistakes less and less.

In fact, it's only by making mistakes that your fear of mistakes will begin to melt away.

Mistakes help you learn faster

I knew of someone who was **learning German** and was in conversation with a native speaker. In this conversation, she accidentally used the word *lecken*. What she meant to say was *lächeln*, which translates to “smile”, but she'd accidentally said: “lick”. The native speaker burst out laughing and was quick to correct her mistake for her, causing her much merriment in the process.

Yes, people might laugh at your mistakes. But that doesn't have to be painful.

Needless to say – she won't be forgetting the **German** word for “smile” anytime soon!

Mistakes help you connect with people

When you're at school, mistakes can directly affect you, usually by lowering your mark on an exam.

But what about in life?

Messing up when you're speaking a new language isn't going to have all that much impact on your life. At the worst, you might feel a little bit silly or have some difficulty getting your point across to whoever you're talking to. The key factor is – **you're communicating**. This is what you should be focusing on.

Start speaking today

I hope you understand now why the pursuit of “perfect” fluency is a meaningless goal that really does more harm than good. Recognise that fluency is different from perfection, contrive a method of achieving your goal and above all, don't let fear overpower you.

Get out there and start communicating. You'll never look back, I can assure you of that.

Chapter 4: How Beginners Can Outsmart “Expert” Language Learners

When you’re a beginner in a language, and you meet someone who’s studied it for years, it can be a bit of a shock.

You wonder: “How are they so damn good?”

It feels like they’re leagues ahead of you.

How can you hope to stay motivated enough to catch up with the more advanced learners? Maybe you’re thinking that none of your hard work is going to pay off for months or years!

Why even bother?

Here’s why. First of all, you *don’t* have to wait months or years to be able to use your new language effectively. You can start right away! Even if you’re a beginner, there are some powerful language hacks you can employ that will have you speaking on par with, or even outsmarting, those more advanced learners that you feel are impossible to compete with right now.

How can you outsmart more advanced learners? Easy, if you have the right attitude, study the right resources, and learn some speaking and listening techniques to convince other speakers that you’re not a beginner at all. As a beginner you can outsmart advanced learners because you can...

1. Ignore the Academic Textbooks and Study the Vocabulary You Need

So much time in language classes is wasted studying vocabulary you’ll almost never need, at the expense of vocabulary that you’ll *definitely* need on a daily basis when using that language. Unless you plan to spend most of your time working in an office environment where you’ll be immersed in your target language, how often are you really going to need the vocabulary for “stapler”, “chalk”, or “hole punch”? These words are generally taught in the classroom because they’re items commonly found in classrooms. But isn’t the whole point of learning a language so that you can use it *outside* the classroom?

Too many language learners get to an “advanced” level in their courses without actually being able to converse about topics that are relevant to their lives. You can avoid this pitfall right from the start. Don’t get stuck in the trap of learning vocabulary “suitable” for your level. Learn what you actually need, and use it! Think of your main goal of language learning, and head in that direction *right away*.

Do you want to speak the language while on holiday? Then learn vocabulary commonly found in phrasebooks. Yes, believe it or not, you can start learning phrases like “When will the restaurant close?” which contain the (*gasp!*) future tense, even if you haven’t yet learned the names of all the colours!

Perhaps you want to learn the language in order to work as an au pair in another country.

In that case, you'd focus on vocabulary relevant to households and childcare. You might even get hired over a more advanced speaker who can conjugate verbs perfectly in every tense but can't talk about topics that weren't in their course curriculum!

Sure, if you want to work in an office or a school overseas, then learn that vocabulary like "stapler" and "chalk". The point is, learn vocabulary that's *relevant* to what you plan to do with the language, and your competence in that language will surpass that of the advanced students who refuse to deviate from their rigid lesson plans.

2. Adopt the Homer Simpson Method and Make the Most of the Vocabulary You Have

In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the lead character Edmond Dantès met a fellow prisoner, the wise Abbé Faria, who told Dantès that he was constantly improving his Greek language skills. When asked how that was possible in prison, Faria replied, "Why, I made a vocabulary of the words I knew; turned, returned, and arranged them, so as to enable me to express my thoughts through their medium....I cannot hope to be very fluent, but I certainly should have no difficulty in explaining my wants and wishes; and that would be quite as much as I should ever require."

I believe every language learner should put these wise words into practice. I call it the *Homer Simpson Method*, and I'll explain why in a moment.

Even if your beginner vocabulary is limited, there's no reason why you can't arrange the words you do know, with a little practice, to make yourself understood in your target language almost as well as any advanced speaker.

A good way to start practising is to look at an object that you'd like to know the name of – Google image search is a convenient tool for this – and try your best to describe it *without looking up any new words*. Don't know the word for "house"? Try, "thing that people live in". "Telephone"? What about, "thing to talk to people far away"?

Soon you'll be able to do this with any new object you see. You might need to get creative to make yourself understood in conversation, but trust me, it's better than stopping mid-sentence every five seconds to look up the right word, or worse, not speaking at all and never learning the word! Once the other person understands your meaning, they'll immediately tell you the correct word, and then you'll never forget it.

A friend of mine once referred to a "tube that gives water in the kitchen" in their target language because they hadn't yet learned the word for "faucet". And Homer Simpson once forgot the word "spoon", but he made himself understood by asking Marge for that "metal...dealy...you use to...dig...food". It wasn't very elegant, but they both got what they needed in the end!

3. Take Advantage of the Goldmine of Online Language Resources

Even one year ago, there weren't nearly as many language-learning resources available online as there are today. I regularly write articles directing my readers to hundreds of language-specific resources available online, just to try to keep up with all the new ones being released! Even endangered languages, like Occitan and certain indigenous languages of the Americas, are gaining more and more language learners thanks to the Internet.

There's never been a better time to start speaking a new language. Those speakers who started years ago might be more advanced than you now, but you can learn faster than they did thanks to the boom in high-quality online language-learning courses and free resources. And as with any project, when you see measurable results quickly, you become far more motivated to keep working toward your goal. And motivation is half the battle!

4. Steer Well Clear of the Need to be Perfect

Advanced language learners generally aren't used to making mistakes. Many of them feel like they left "that phase" behind them long ago. But this often means that if they want to say something that they don't know all the right vocabulary and verb conjugations for, they might just keep their mouth shut and not say it at all rather than risk saying it incorrectly and shattering their "perfect" image. They'll stay trapped in the safe world of familiar words, reluctant to venture outside of their comfort zone, lest they feel like a beginner all over again.

Meanwhile, as a beginner, you don't have the luxury of knowing enough grammar and vocabulary to not make any mistakes. Since your comfort zone is so small, everything you say will start out imperfect. But as long as you make it a habit to **keep speaking** and don't let your mistakes discourage you, you'll quickly get used to that feeling and you'll never be afraid to get outside your comfort zone and say something new, even if you don't know all of the correct words or grammar. Before long, as you keep talking with native speakers, these mistakes will simply disappear from your vernacular, maybe even without you realizing.

Make it a habit to forget about perfectionism *from the beginning*, and you'll soon be learning at an exponential rate, while the more advanced learners who never got into this habit are stuck in a rut.

5. Fake it 'til You Make it

You don't need to be an advanced speaker of a language in order to sound like one.

Learn how to inject personality into your conversations, and your ability to converse in that language will instantly hit the next level. Instead of stumbling through your sentences with *ums* and *ahs* that'll make the other person lose interest faster than you can say, "The word is on the tip of my tongue!", you'll keep them engaged and maintain the conversation's momentum. This will give you far more speaking experience in the process.

Try these techniques to outshine more advanced speakers in your conversations:

The dramatic pause. If you don't know exactly how to correctly finish that sentence you just started, don't just halt mid-way through with a "sorry" while you gather your thoughts.

Instead, make the pause sound like a natural part of the sentence, as if you did it on purpose! Don't just say, for instance, "I read about it in my...hang on...what's the right word...oh yeah! Textbook!". Instead, say, "I read about it in my – you guessed it – [dramatic pause] – textbook!" and you can bet that the other person will still be paying attention, and might get a chuckle out of your quirky speaking style, which will keep them coming back to speak with you more.

Conversational connectors. This is another phenomenal way to fill the gaps in a conversation while you're planning what to say. Instead of answering the other person's questions

with yes or no, followed by “And you?”, which sounds very unnatural in almost any language, add a connector such as, “That’s a great question, thanks for asking”.

Not only does the conversation sound more natural, and flow back and forth between the speakers, but you can spend those moments when you’re using conversational connectors in order to think of a good reply to the question.

6. Polish up Your “Contextese”

Even if you can’t speak your target language at an advanced level, that doesn’t mean you can’t *understand* it at an advanced level, once you get some practice filling in the blanks when you don’t understand every word you hear in a sentence.

I call this unspoken communication “Contextese”, because you’re relying on things like the body language of the speaker, the tone of their voice, and the few words in the sentence that you do understand – in other words, the *context* of the sentence.

So many advanced language learners spend all their study time on vocabulary and verb conjugations, and then get completely lost in conversation if they don’t understand every word. They focus too much on just the words, instead of on everything else. Learn to see the big picture in a conversation, and you’ll stun advanced learners speechless with your level of comprehension.

A Beginner’s Mindset Can Make You a Cunning Linguist

Every language learner, no matter how advanced, was once a beginner in their target language.

How long you *remain* a beginner, however, will depend on how cunning you are in your study techniques, and how much you use the language for *actual communication*. Whatever your level is now, don’t let advanced speakers scare you away from using your target language; with these language hacks, you can start using your language on par with them right now, and go from seeming more advanced to *being* more advanced in far less time than you would with traditional approaches.

Remember: **whether you achieve competence in your target language in weeks or years is up to you.** Which will you choose?

Chapter 5: The CIA is Wrong: It Doesn't Take 1,000+ Hours to Learn a Language

Does it really take up to 4,400 hours to learn a language?

According to the US Department of State's Foreign Service Institute, that's how long it should take. Study for 20 hours a week, and that's over four years! Reduce that to five hours a week – a more realistic number for most of us – and you're bridging two decades. Crazy!

Don't get me wrong. Learning a language requires dedication, focus and commitment. Whichever method you choose to learn a language, it will take hundreds of hours to reach fluency.

But fluency doesn't have to be as heart-crushingly distant as 20 years away...

In any case, I believe that focusing on the number of hours *per week* you study is a much more important measurement than the years you spend learning a language.

But just how many hours does it really take to learn a language?

Before we dig into more numbers from "official" sources (including the college where CIA trainees go for language training), let's understand what we're aiming for more precisely.

Precise Milestones

As mentioned before, when I learn a new language, I often like to aim to reach a level where I have "social equivalency" that to me would mean I'm fluent in the language.

When social equivalence is the goal, I'd usually not try to pass a specific test. In my view, language learning is not an academic pursuit; it's a practical one. I aim to be able to use the language effectively in everyday conversation.

But if we do look at it academically, I believe the system that separates language levels most efficiently to be the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) scale. It essentially gives us three ranges we may find ourselves within: A (beginner), B (intermediate) and C (advanced), each of which is then further split into 1 (lower) and 2 (upper).

On this testable scale, my *fluency* goal is the B2 (upper intermediate) level. This means I "can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party."

With this as my goal, the way I study languages is completely different to the systems used by many "official" language learning organisations.

My goal is to communicate. Their goal is usually to help you pass a specific test.

So, how many hours do they say you need to pass a language test?

How Many Hours Does it Take to Learn a Language? “Official” and Unofficial Estimates

To answer this question, I researched several different official and unofficial sources on how long it takes to learn a language. Each has a different estimate, but their conclusions were all fairly similar.

To be clear from the outset – I’m going to disagree with these conclusions, and I’ll explain why later in this chapter. So please don’t be daunted by these figures! I know it’s possible to learn a language much more quickly than these numbers suggest.

One more thing before we look at the numbers: most of these estimates measure study time in classroom hours. But we don’t just learn in a classroom – we have to study on our own as well. The suggested ratio is two hours of personal study time for every one hour of classroom time. That makes one classroom hour into three study hours.

To make this easier for calculations, I’ll err on the conservative side and make one classroom hour into two study hours.

Here’s what I found:

- The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is the system used by many language learning centres in Europe. By their estimate, it takes around 600 classroom hours for English learners to reach a B2 (upper intermediate) level. That’s 1,200 study hours in total.
- The American Council of Teaching Foreign Languages says that it takes between 480 and 1,320 classroom hours to reach an upper intermediate level in a new language, depending on the difficulty of the language. Double that to include personal study time, and that’s between 960 and 2,640 hours.
- The Defense Language Institute is where the CIA, members of the U.S. armed forces and various other government agencies go to learn foreign languages. Their language courses equate to between 780 and 1,950 hours in classroom time. Students at the DLI study languages full-time, seven hours per day, with only an additional two to three hours per day of homework. But that still works out to between 1,002 and 2,786 total study hours.
- Huan Japes of English UK, a trade body for language colleges, says it should take around 360 hours to get to around a B1 (lower intermediate) level. That’s 720 hours including personal study time.
- Research by the U.S. Department of State’s Foreign Service Institute found that adult native English speakers took 600 classroom hours to reach an advanced level for languages like Spanish or French, and 2,200 classroom hours for Chinese or Arabic. With two to three hours of homework after every seven-hour day studying languages, that works out to between 772 and 3,143 total study hours.

Why These Numbers are Misleading

As you can see, there is quite a range in estimates between the sources I’ve cited. They range from 720 to 3,143 hours, and that’s to reach somewhere between a lower-intermediate and an advanced level in a new language.

If you were to study a language on your own for four hours a day, five days a week, for a total of 20 hours a week, these estimates mean it would take you somewhere between 45 weeks and 220 weeks to reach B2 level of your target language. That's between one and four years!

So, how do you account for hundreds of people around the world (including myself) who are able to reach an upper-intermediate (B2) level in a matter of months? Well, there are a few reasons why the “official” numbers are misleading.

With that in mind, let's take a look at a few of the myths behind the official numbers.

Myth 1: Tests are what really matter

The schools and organisations that these figures come from are focused on helping students pass a specific test or reach language mastery.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with those who pursue an academic understanding of languages. Personally I think it's wonderful that there are those who have dedicated themselves to a scholarly pursuit of language theory and pedagogy.

My purpose for learning languages is quite different. I rarely study to meet the requirements of a specific test.

My test is *real life*. My aim is to use the language as quickly as possible, and so my focus is on a “real world” approach. In other words, I aim to *use* the language, as opposed to *analysing* the language.

Myth 2: Classrooms are the best place to learn a language

If you're working to communicate in the language with native speakers, then find the methods that are best for that purpose.

Most traditional classrooms have one person standing in front of a group, transferring information in one direction. Is that the best use of your time if your focus is on practising the language as much as possible?

The amount of time you get to speak during most language classes is pretty low. In a classroom of 20 students you might get called on to speak with the teacher just four or five times for a total of around five minutes altogether.

I don't know about you, but five minutes per hour is not the best use of my time.

Myth 3: Textbooks are the best way to learn a language

In my view, speaking is the best way to practise a language. And, of course, the best way to speak the language is one-on-one with a native speaker.

In one hour with a native speaker, the entire time is spent actively using the language. Even if you're listening to the other person speak for half the time, that's still 30 minutes every hour where you're speaking the language.

That's a 600% increase in the amount of practice you get over a classroom environment. Instead of spending six hours in a classroom, you could get the same amount of speaking practice in just one hour with a native speaker!

Myth 4: Your teacher knows exactly what you should study

That material you cover with a one-on-one native speaker is different from what you study in a classroom, for one very important reason: *it's relevant to you!*

In a classroom the teacher tells you what material you should study and the words you need to learn. For example, you may have an entire week focused on different modes of transportation, when the only method you actually ever use in your own life is a bicycle. Do you really need to learn the word for “monorail” or “freight train” as a priority?

By comparison, your own study with a native speaker is completely relevant to you and your life. The words you use are related to you, so not only are you able to speak more quickly with a larger number of useful words, but you have a better chance of remembering words about yourself.

Studying with the one-on-one, native speaker method means you're able to use the language much more quickly than when studying in a classroom.

How to Bust Language Myths and Become a Language Hacker

Most traditional language teachers are focused on teaching you the language, but they spend very little time teaching you how to *learn* the language. This means you are stuck studying with ineffective methods like rote memorization or listen-and-repeat tactics.

You've seen above that one-on-one practice with a native speaker is more effective for learning to speak, but when you start to incorporate specific language-learning “hacks”, you can learn even faster.

Here are a few of the most powerful hacks I use myself to help with my language learning efficiency:

The Pomodoro Technique

Use this time-hacking method to increase your productive sprints. To use this technique, alternate 25 minute work sessions with five minute breaks. This allows your brain to get some breathing room.

Why does this work? If you don't time-box your study sessions, the more you study in a single session, the worse you get at retaining the information and staying fresh as you get deeper into that session. Take breaks and you'll be much more fresh!

Mnemonics and Spaced Repetition Systems

These memory-boosting techniques are the cornerstone of my language missions and allow me to quickly build up my store of useful words and phrases in record time. Read more about these in chapter 6.

Use italki to find low-cost online teachers

You don't have to travel to a country to immerse yourself in a language. You can find teachers and language exchange partners online. That way, you can practise your language from the comfort of your own home. No need to buy a plane ticket! One of my favourite tools for this is italki, a marketplace for online language tutors and teachers.

Stop studying the language; live the language!

Incorporate your new language into every aspect of your life. Listen to music in your target language. Watch movies in the language. Play computer games or use your phone in the language. Listen to podcasts in your target language. Sing in the language. Heck, even *think* in the language. This constant exposure will make it easier to speak the language and recall vocabulary.

I'll share some of my favourite language podcast and other resources in the [Resources section](#) at the end of this book.

The truth about how many hours you need to become fluent

So, just how long does it really take to learn a language?

Based on my experience I would put the total hours necessary to reach a B2 level in most languages is around 400 to 600 hours. Now, before I say anything else, let me explain a few key points:

First, the number of languages you have learned before will affect this number. If it's your first time learning a language (and the first time is almost always the most difficult) the number will be closer to 600 hours.

Second, I use the hacks I mentioned above, so my efficiency is higher than that of most people who are studying using "traditional" methods of rote memorization and listen-and-repeat tactics.

Finally, keep in mind the goal I mentioned before. The only test I'm trying to pass is real-life interactions. I don't study the language, I *live* the language, and my focus is always on speaking from day one.

So, let's break the hours down.

First, let's look at an intensive learning project.

If you're studying five hours a day, seven days a week (which is about what I do during my language learning missions) and use a combination of live one-on-one practice sessions with a native speaker and self-study, you will be accumulating 35 hours a week. Over the course of 12 weeks (three months) that works out to around 420 hours. That falls right in line with my prediction on how many hours it takes.

What if you can't be that intense in your language learning?

I know that not everyone can put 5 hours a day into learning a language. But anyone (that includes you!) can absolutely find 1-2 hours a day, no matter how busy they are.

When you have less intensive study times, you do need to account for catching up, because you'll have less momentum. Even with 33% extra study time to account for this, you still only need 560 hours.

How about I illustrate this with a few real-world examples:

Lauren's Russian mission

Lauren, my partner, is a fairly new language learner. After one month of studying Russian for two hours a day (60 hours total), she reached around a high A1 or low A2 level.

Maneesh's language learning experience

My friend Maneesh Sethi is able to learn a language in 90 days, and he suggests studying four to eight hours a day (we'll average it at six), seven days a week. That works out to 42 hours a week which, over 12 weeks, is 504 hours. That's right inside my 400 to 600 hour range.

Holly's Portuguese mission

Holly is one of the team members at *Fluent in 3 Months*. After three months of studying Portuguese for an average of one or two hours a day (180 hours at a high estimate), she reached a high B1 or low B2 level, and was able to hold confident conversations on a range of topics with native Portuguese speakers.

If You Only Take Away One Thing, Remember This

There are two big lessons that come from all this analysis.

The first is that the traditional way of looking at language learning has some problems, because it is based on two huge myths:

- Classrooms are the best place to learn to speak a language. (They aren't!)
- The goal of every language learner is to pass a test. (It isn't!)

The number of hours that most "official" organisations say it takes to learn a language is built upon these (at least in my case) incorrect assumptions.

To become a fluent speaker of a language, with a focus on communication, then the best way to improve your skills is to speak the language.

When your goal is connecting with real people through a new language, then the number one priority should be to figure out the most effective and efficient ways to speak as much as possible. And that is what my approach is all about.

If you want to learn the language to *use* the language, then the road ahead just got a lot shorter!

Chapter 6: The 7 Most Common Mistakes Language Learners Make (and How to Fix Them)

Here's a common scenario: you decide to learn a language and tell all your friends and family your plans.

Then they tell you about the “best” way to learn a second language (even though they don't speak any other languages themselves).

“Take a class!” says one person.

“Get a degree in the language,” suggests another.

“Just watch a ton of movies,” chimes in a third.

Those all *sound* like great strategies, so you pick one and gleefully dive in.

Fast forward three weeks (or three years) and you're barely able to form a sentence. Fed up, you give up learning the language.

That is, until you pick it up again with a new strategy.

With each new strategy you try, the same thing happens. In the end, you give up completely.

Here's the thing: most common language-learning strategies don't work because they ignore the most important rule of language learning: you can't just study a language – *you have to **use** it.*

Let's see why some of the most popular language-learning strategies don't work, and how to adjust your approach to quickly level up your language skills.

Mistake 1: Take an Academic Style Language Class

Classrooms are not the best place to learn languages. Spending most of the time listening passively to someone talk at you about the language (often in your native tongue!) with very little *speaking* on your part is a poor use of your time.

The number of students graduating with 5+ years of classroom instruction in a language who still can't hold a conversation shows that classroom learning is not the best way to spend your time or money.

The Language Hacker's Fix: Accountability

If you still have to take a class (such as for your college course), here are some ways to take the *slow* process of classroom learning and speed things up for rapid language learning.

Get accountability outside the classroom. The most common argument in favour of language classes is that it is too difficult to study effectively on your own. And while classes

can be great for forcing you into a program of study and accountability, I would argue that you can get the same thing from your network of friends, or a program like the Add1Challenge.

Supplement your classroom time with an equal amount of time actually speaking the language. You can find tons of native speakers in dozens of languages over at italki, a marketplace for online language tutors and teachers. One hour of time spent with a native speaker *talking* in the language and reviewing what you learn in the classroom is *always* more effective than several hours of self-study at the school library.

Use SRS (Spaced Repetition Systems) to quickly memorize new vocabulary. SRS (Spaced Repetition Systems) can help you learn new words *much* faster. SRS works by prompting you to remember words and phrases when you are just on the verge of forgetting them. Research shows this is a really effective way of making sure those new words stick in your memory. My favourite tool for SRS is Anki, which is available for iOS, Android and desktop computers. I like Anki because it allows you to build your own virtual flash-card deck of words and phrases you want to memorize. Mosalingua and Memrise also use SRS.

For more information on all the above tools and resources, please check out the [Resources section](#) at the end of this book.

Mistake 2: Consider Studying Linguistics in School

Linguistics is all about picking apart languages and discovering how they work. If a language is a car, then linguistics is looking inside the engine.

Many language learners believe that knowing a language's rules means you will be able to use them. It's a strange belief since it often doesn't apply in other areas. If you only knew the rules of kickboxing would you feel confident getting in the ring? I hope not!

The difference between linguists and polyglots boils down to *knowledge vs. skill*. Many linguists don't actually speak more than one language so aren't in a position to help you develop language skills. While linguistics is fascinating, it's not actually related to helping you directly *use* a language.

The Language Hacker's Fix: Get Real World Practice

If you have dedicated yourself to the study of the structure of languages, I tip my hat to you. But it isn't the same as being able to *communicate* in the language.

Understand that studying and speaking are different. The best way transition from a "language student" to a "language speaker" is to change your focus from book learning to "mouth using".

To avoid mixing the two together, divide your focus and think of each one as a completely separate subject.

Imagine working during the day as a radio DJ, and also being passionate about playing the guitar. They're both related to music, but from very different perspectives. *Studying linguistics should never be a substitute for practising your target language.*

Mistake 3: Watch Movies and TV Shows in Your New Language

Watching movies or television shows as a way to “passively” learn a language sounds like a language learner’s dream. That is, until you actually try it.

Passive language acquisition is one of those myths that preys on the lazy “couch potato” inside each of us that tries to get something without putting forth any effort. Learning a language takes work. You just can’t become fluent by passively listening to a language.

Movies and TV shows *can* help, but not if you plant yourself in front of a screen for eight hours a day. You’re no more likely to learn a language doing this than you are to become a pilot by watching aeroplanes. You need the right approach and mindset.

The Language Hacker’s Fix: Get Involved in Your Movies

You can actually supplement your language learning by watching movies, if you go about it the right way. Here’s how to do that:

Don’t just watch the movie. Study it. Viewing a movie for entertainment means you aren’t focused on learning the language. Treat the movie like you would a textbook, and *study* the material. Activate the subtitles (in the target language, not your native one), and note the tricky words.

Break things up into consumable, repeatable segments. A two-hour movie is too much language to absorb at once. Break it up into segments of 10 minutes or less, and review them multiple times until you have really learned something of substance.

Engage with the material. A movie is an open book on body language, accents, inflection, pronunciation and many other areas of language learning. Don’t just sit on your hands! Get involved in the story, act out parts, repeat lines and body movements and make the language come alive!

Mistake 4: Listen to Songs in Your New Language

As with movies and television shows, listening to music is often seen as a magic path to learning a language. The problem is that songs are written poetically so they aren’t usually a good source for everyday grammar and vocabulary.

Listening to songs does have its place in language learning – as long as you have the right approach.

The Language Hacker’s Fix: Sing Along

Instead of repeating myself, I’ll just recommend that you do the same as you would for movies or television shows: study the songs you listen to (don’t listen passively), repeat segments (to really understand the material) and engage with the song (don’t just listen – *sing!*).

One additional hack is to recognise that song lyrics often take creative license with a language, so while they are helpful to your studies, keep in mind that it is the equivalent to studying poetry.

Mistake 5: Use the Rosetta Stone / Pimsleur / Duolingo System

Popular language learning systems like Duolingo and Pimsleur do have some positive benefits. Duolingo gamifies language learning, which is good in principle. Pimsleur's system helps with getting certain phrases down through audio training. Rosetta Stone is... sorry, I can't think of any redeeming features... Yellow. Yes, it does yellow incredibly well!

But any system you buy or even get access to free of charge is going to have one major disadvantage that you can't escape: *they aren't tailored to you and your life*. Most of the words and expressions you'll use won't be useful in your own life, and this lowers the effectiveness of these programs.

The Language Hacker's Fix: Choose What Works For You

If you are going to use these systems (perhaps they were given to you as a birthday gift), there are three recommendations to help you make the most of each.

Read my reviews of each system. Be sure to check out reviews of the Rosetta Stone system, the Pimsleur approach to language learning, and the Duolingo language learning app to provide you with a big picture pros-and-cons view of each. You can find these reviews in the [Resources section](#) at the end of this book.

Supplement with personalised materials. As you go through each system, develop your own list of personalised vocabulary and phrases. If the topic of the lesson is "shopping", then write out a list of 20 items that you shop for on a regular basis yourself and add those to your flashcard deck. This allows you to use the sentence structures and grammar you're learning with relevant vocabulary.

Plug up the holes in their materials. Each system has deficiencies, so fill in the blank spaces with your own activities. For example, If the system doesn't include a lot of speaking, then be sure to converse with native speakers. Or if the system doesn't provide much listening practice, find listening materials online.

Mistake 6: Translate a Book Until You Learn the Language

Back when I started my first new language – Spanish – I sat down with a copy of *El señor de los anillos* (The Lord of the Rings) figuring that if I forced myself to read it with my dictionary in hand then for sure I would be fluent by the time I was done.

It took me an entire week to get to page 2!

This method might seem logical, but it's completely impractical. It takes a huge amount of time. You'll also be limited to the author's specific writing style, which may make you sound strange to native speakers.

Can you learn a language from a book? Absolutely! But only with the right approach.

The Language Hacker's Fix: Young Adult Fiction

Books should be a *supplement* to a language study program, not the core of it. And just like movies, television and music, you have to change your mentality from entertainment to *education*.

I recommend selecting a book that you have access to in your native language so you can compare them side by side. Young adult novels (think *Harry Potter*) work really well for this because the language used isn't too stylised and the vocabulary won't be too advanced.

Here are my suggestions on using a book to learn a language:

- Tackle the book in segments, such as paragraph by paragraph.
- Get the book in your native language so you can get the gist of each segment before reading on.
- Preview the foreign language version to see how much you can understand without studying the text.
- Select any words you don't know which appear multiple times and add them to your SRS flashcard deck.
- Read the passage to your italki tutor to work on your pronunciation and accent
- Record a native speaker (perhaps your tutor or a language exchange partner) saying the passage in both regular speed and slowly. Alternatively, download the audiobook if it's available.
- Review the passage multiple times. First, make sure you understand what's being said. Then practise pronouncing it.

If you spend sufficient time on each segment of the book you will find your comprehension and use of the language improve quickly.

Mistake 7: Only Interact with Other Language Learners

If you're in a class, or have friends who are also learning a language, you might think getting together to practise the language will build your skills. After all, isn't it important to speak as much as possible?

Meeting up with other learners to practise your speaking can be really helpful, especially in the early stages of learning a language. In fact, as a beginner, it can be the best approach. The problem is that other language learners are unlikely to stretch you once you're at an intermediate level. To really accelerate your learning, you need a different approach.

The Language Hacker's Fix: Practise With Native Speakers

Interacting with other people learning the same language as you can be really helpful. That said, the best person to speak to when learning a new language is a *native speaker* of that language. You are exposed to subtle nuances in how the language is used that you may not otherwise realise. It is truly invaluable.

If you don't know any native speakers in your area, then use the power of the internet to find a tutor on italki, local meetups, couchsurfing, or language apps such as HelloTalk (more on these in the [Resources section](#) at the end of the book). There are so many great ways to find native speakers online that you really have no excuse.

The Only Approach That Doesn't Work is the One You Give Up On

As you can see, any approach can work, if given the right “language hacker’s” nudge. The biggest mistake I see language learners make isn’t a specific approach, but in not being flexible in their approach.

Constantly evaluate your language-learning strategy and think outside the box to adapt them to your best advantage.

Don’t like your language class? What can you do outside of that room to improve your chances?

Studying linguistics isn’t helping you communicate? Supplement with time *speaking* the language.

Finding movies, music or books ineffective? Break them down and narrow the focus of your study.

Talking to the wrong people? Look for ways to find them on the Internet.

Even if you’ve made all of the mistakes I’ve outlined, that’s a good thing! As I’ve previously said in this book, mistakes are the best way to learn a language. So don’t beat yourself up, but learn from your mistakes. You have the power to turn your approach around and gain fluency.

Chapter 7: How to Practise a Foreign Language Without Travelling Overseas

I love to travel and learn languages by visiting other countries. But sometimes it just isn't desirable or possible *right now*.

The truth is, there's plenty you can do in your own town or even from home to get fluent in a language. In this chapter, I'm only going to discuss **free practising** methods, rather than paid ones.

Don't you need to be abroad to speak a foreign language?

Of course not! Wherever you live in the world, it's actually easier than you think to get in touch with people who speak your target language, either in person or over the Internet. Even if you can't find native speakers who live near you, chances are that you'll find advanced learners of your target language who are enthusiastic to help.

Unless you live in a village up a mountain, if you try hard enough you *can* find opportunities to practise in person! If you live in a major city, you have **no excuses**.

Several years ago, I decided that I wanted to speak *Portuguese*, but this was while I was living in *Paris*. Using the tips I share in this chapter, I was able to learn Portuguese before I ever set foot in Brazil. When I arrived in Brazil for the first time I was already able to communicate with and understand the locals pretty well!

Thanks to the tips in this chapter, I have been able to regularly practise any language that I choose in almost any location.

But there is nobody who speaks that language where I live!

Actually, I take back what I said about the being in a village on the mountain being the exception to being able to practise a language. All you really need is just *one* person to converse with and even if all you have is a fellow villager also interested in that language, you are already on the right track! As long as you have both studied at least the basics, there is a chance to practise what you know.

As I said before, practising with a native speaker at intermediate stages and up is ideal, but to reach the intermediate stage in a language that you are currently uncomfortable speaking, it can sometimes be *better* to speak with non-natives. Seriously.

I learned most of my Spanish (my first foreign language) thanks to the French, German, and Italian Erasmus students I knew when I was living in Valencia. Of course, we were all in the country already, but you can motivate yourself to speak the language no matter where you are. It turns out that it is easier to speak with other learners!

Spaniards tend to speak quickly, and as any native speakers, they use complicated words

and turns of phrase that make any language rich and expressive. However, in the early stage, trying to understand all of that may be too much work, and very simply **being able to communicate** is a barrier that needs to be overcome first.

My foreign friends spoke slower Spanish, and used more basic vocabulary that I was likely to know too, and most important of all, since they were at the same level as me, I didn't feel embarrassed or intimidated when speaking with them. I could also relate to them much more as a fellow learner. Although you can only really improve your language skills very well with natives (as I mentioned in the last chapter), learners can help you with parts of the language they are more familiar with and you can return the favour.

Some natives (although this happens *very rarely*) can occasionally be impatient with you if you are in the early stages of learning their language. If you practise with other learners, then you can reach the stage of speaking quite well without the same kind of pressure (which you get from total immersion and does indeed speed up your learning process). Thanks to my foreign friends, I reached the stage of being able to communicate well enough to start conversing with actual Spaniards after a short time. Communicating with native speakers should always be the end goal. Conversing with other learners is a bridge to reach that goal.

How to find language meet-ups in your area

It's important to remember that the purpose of language is communication, and thus requires you to be social. If you're an introvert, you should still try hard and there are many ways to get out there and meet new people.

So, how do you meet natives or other learners? There are so many resources, that it's impossible to list all of them as this depends on where you live. A little digging and you *will* find something. In the meantime, I can suggest a few websites and other resources that have been useful to me.

[Meetup.com](#). This website's goal is to gather people with similar interests, to get unplugged from the Internet and to actually meet up in person to share and discuss that interest. It has thousands of groups based on a huge range of interests and is especially popular in English-speaking countries. One of those interests is of course *languages* and you may find that there is already a regular meeting for the language you wish to practise (usually meeting up in a bar or restaurant). If you don't see a language meet-up group in your city, create your own!

[Couchsurfing.org](#). Couchsurfing can be used to learn languages, even without travelling. You can host native speakers of the language you're learning in your home for a couple of days, or if you'd rather not, then you can still be a part of an amazing international community by attending the regular meetings, or suggesting one, in the groups and meetings page of the site. These meetings have an international crowd, which should have lots of people willing to speak your target language with you

[Facebook](#). Facebook can be used to find meet-ups that include particular languages. You can search for your city's name and your target language to find relevant groups and events. What if you can't find a group? Then take the initiative and create one!

Classified Ads. You can put a free ad up on Craigslist or your country's equivalent to find people interested in practising your target language with you.

Get Offline. Of course there are ways to find other language learners that *don't require* any use of the internet! Try asking your friends or coworkers if they know any language learners. You'll likely be surprised how easy it is to find people in your network of contacts share your interest in languages. Then you can arrange to meet up to chat and practise what you know.

You can also put up advertisements, especially in universities.

If you feel ready to talk with a native, you can of course get private lessons, or meet up with a native speaker for a language exchange over coffee.

Meeting up with people in the real world to learn a language is great – but there's plenty you can do over the Internet without leaving your home. That's the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 8: Why Learning Languages Online can be Better than in Person

One of the best tools available to us nowadays to help us learn a language is the Internet. Thanks to Skype, Facebook and other online tools, it's easier than ever to chat with native speakers.

The pros are many. It doesn't require travel. Through many sites it's cheaper than in-person lessons, and it usually has way more options than you would find in your home town.

In fact, online lessons can actually be *better* than face-to-face language learning. Let's take a look at why that is.

The advantages of using technology to learn a language

There are some things that you can do **better** digitally than in the real world. For instance:

- Online, you can decide whether you'd like to see the teacher or not. If you're having a bad hair day, or if you can't stand the idea of someone *seeing* you struggling as a beginner, just don't activate your webcam and make it audio only. Easy. This is especially useful for shy or introverted language learners!
- Your computer and your home are a familiar environment. This is absolutely key for people who are afraid of getting into language learning. It's not just speaking another language, but sometimes the *place* where you're speaking can create bad associations.
- It's way easier to avoid excuses. If it's raining, or if there is a public transport strike, or if your dog is just *really cuddly* that day and you can't bear to part, then you may be tempted to skip your class, "just this once". The only good excuse for missing an online class is if the Internet goes down!
- While you're speaking online, you can have a tab (or several!) open on your computer to a dictionary or translator that will help you speak and keep the conversation flowing, and you can use it without distracting your teacher. This "cheating" is something I do the first few times I speak a new language, but I do it in such a way that it's less distracting than using paperback dictionaries would be in person.
- You can record your Skype lesson using software for personal use to review later, and the option is included by default in some software. Recording an in-person class is more cumbersome, and often requires special equipment. Plus your teacher may become extremely distracted by the camera in his/her face.
- And, you can use a host of cool digital tools that I'll describe below...

In recent years, I've learned new languages almost exclusively online. I've improved my technique and have found some cool ways to make the experience even more rewarding and useful for me as a student.

Live correction with Google Docs

In-person classes are indeed great for getting spoken practice, but they're not so great for getting written practice. You are either writing in silence, or waiting for your teacher to read in silence. And I don't know about you, but I'm more comfortable typing than I am writing. So if I'm practising in person, should I bring a laptop and then hand it to my teacher for correction? It's sloppy.

One alternative is to write in your free-time and then hand it to your teacher. But I'm personally *terrible* with homework, so I found a way to improve my writing skills, while getting correction and not wasting class time.

I get **live correction** via Google Docs.

The way this works is that you and your teacher both view the same document and can both make changes to it *in real time*. If you want to get your mistakes corrected immediately as you write, you can do this, but what some of my teachers do is let me type and they will have another document open, and they will type out corrections and explanations there in real time as they see my mistakes.

Usually for this part, I turn off the audio/video feed and focus on writing, and then when I finish a section I get back on the call and my teacher guides me through his/her corrections without delay, since they were reading my words as I typed.

My teachers also use Google Docs to type what I say as I say it, and leave comments.

This sounds very simple, but the benefit is that they are still **speaking** to me naturally without interrupting for corrections. After the conversation, I get to see the corrections. I have found this to be a really effective way to get feedback **without** interrupting the flow of the conversation.

Screenshare for joint reading

Skype and other video calling software has an option to share your screen with your teacher and vice versa. This is a great simulation of reading a book together, and is very useful if they have the book or their personal notes scanned.

Get out of the classroom – virtually

Once, one of my teachers on Skype had a very unique idea and took his smartphone with him to a festival, found a good wifi signal and I got to see and hear people dancing and singing.

These “day trips” are easier than you think, and just as effective as they would be in person. My teacher has also had me give a tour of my home in the target language, and at times if their friend pops in, instead of it being a nuisance, they've actually invited them to join in on the chat and give me practice with another native speaker!

Online video/audio calls are evolving all the time. These kind of cool tricks like being able to move around with your smartphone and setting up group calls were impossible years ago when the likes of Skype were in their infancy.

I'm excited to see developments that allow us to learn at a distance, bringing teachers and students together and bridging the gap so that language learning is open to everyone.

In the next chapter, I'll share some more ideas on how to use Skype for language exchanges.

Chapter 9: How to Use Skype to Learn a Language

Having real conversations with native speakers is one of the best ways to quickly improve your language skills.

Yet I'm constantly surprised by the number of people who wait years before they take that step – or who never take it at all!

Recently I was in a room with 20 language learners and asked them “How many of you have used Skype or other technology to practise your target language online?” Not a single person raised their hand.

This needs to change. Seriously, if you haven't done it yet, now's the time to start.

So many language learners *know they should* start practising with a native speaker sooner rather than later... and then just don't. Hopefully this chapter will give you the extra nudge you need to make it happen!

How to Find a Skype Language Exchange Partner

Your first task is to find another person who speaks your target language and who is willing to chat with you over Skype. Here are a few tools you can use to do that. For links to these tools, check out the [Resources section](#).

Italki – My favourite language-learning resource

I've already mentioned the excellent service italki plenty of times in this book.

Italki is an online language learning hub that connects you with language teachers from around the world.

When you're filtering through the various tutors and teachers, pick a native speaker who lives in the country you're focused on. This will give you a direct pipeline to the authentic and modern way to speak your target language.

HelloTalk – Casually chat in your target language throughout the day

If you're on the shy side, you might try HelloTalk for a totally different experience. This app works on your smartphone, and connects you with other people learning your language who want to do a language exchange. The app lets you send voice messages or “text messages” to people who match up with your language, which is great if you don't feel like being on video. When you get a text message on HelloTalk, the app will help you translate it, *and* it will auto-correct your replies to get rid of the mistakes.

What I really love about HelloTalk is that whenever I suggest it to a reader, they usually get back to me with great news like “I've been chatting in Mandarin in all day!” And that's always great to hear. The downside to HelloTalk is that you won't find professional teachers on the site – just other language learners (but they can still teach you a lot).

Join a language-learning community and find an exchange partner there!

Try something for me.

Go into your Facebook account and search for “Esperanto”. Do you see that public group there with over 20,000 members? Now go to meetup.com, type in your target language and your city, and click “search.” I just randomly searched for “German” in Minneapolis, Minnesota and found several different local communities.

In most cities all over the world, I promise you’ll be surprised by what you’ll find. There are communities of people *everywhere* who are searching for someone to practise their languages with. Why can’t that someone be you?

All you really need to do to find a language exchange partner is to *step outside your comfort zone*.

That’s the hardest part. Finding people is easy. Having the courage to talk to them is harder, but so worth it.

What to Expect from Your Skype Language Exchange Partner

There are basically two types of people you will practise speaking with on Skype: language exchange partners (free) or teachers/tutors (paid).

With language exchange partners you should expect to spend some time helping the other person with your native language. You can suggest that each of you go back and forth, spending 10-15 minutes speaking in their native language, and then 10-15 minutes in yours. Set up the rules at the start of the call to keep things fair.

But keep in mind that most language exchange partners are not professional teachers and may not have any experience teaching their language to others. This is a great way to practise speaking, but you shouldn’t expect too much in terms of structured lessons or in-depth explanations. And you may get the dreaded question, “What do you want to talk about?” So I recommend you arrive online with at least some idea of what you want to practise, so you’ll be prepared when you get that question.

Paid teachers, on the other hand, focus entirely on helping you speak and understand your target language. While you do have to pay money, the costs are considerably less than you would pay for an in-person one-on-one teacher, or even a group class when you pay in your local currency. Plus, you get to do it from the comfort of your own desk or couch!

With paid teachers you should be clear about what you are looking to get out of your lesson, and prepare some materials or topics that you want to review.

A bit of preparation before you talk to your teacher will let you focus on your most important areas.

Two Steps to Prepare for Your Skype Language Exchange

Step 1: Decide What to Talk About

Whichever language I'm learning, I usually prepare for my Skype speaking practice in the same way. I always start with phrases and words that are specific and relevant to my interests, and I make a list of words that are related to me and my life, so I can refer to it when talking about myself. If you've gone through my free [Speak in a Week course](#), then you'll already be quite familiar with this step.

Make sure that you have practised your phrases several times, and know how they should sound. Listening to the words beforehand on [forvo.com](#) is really helpful for this.

Another handy group of phrases to have ready are "survival phrases" - those that will help you with language learning during your lesson. For example "Can you please repeat that more slowly?" or "Can you write it down for me?" These will become invaluable during your first conversations in the language.

Just knowing a few phrases you want to say in advance will take you really far.

Step 2: Tackle Your Nerves

Feeling nervous? So is the other person!

One of the biggest reasons I hear that people don't take the plunge to practise on Skype is nerves!

I'm always hearing, "Benny, I'm shy!" or "Benny, I'm scared!" Well, I can't change that, but I can tell you that *your exchange partner is likely just as nervous as you are*.

The person on the screen won't be scrutinizing your language skills the way you imagine they will be. They won't be judging you. They won't be annoyed with your mistakes or slow speech. They'll probably be too busy worrying that you will judge them, that you will be annoyed with them. They'll be focusing on their own mistakes, not yours!

A lot of people get nervous the first time they speak with a native speaker. You'll probably never feel totally "ready" to start speaking with another person. This is *completely normal*.

In fact, if you feel "ready" to speak with a native speaker, then you've probably waited too long! Feeling a bit terrified during your first conversation is to be expected and, while I can't give you a magic pill to take away the nerves, I *can* tell you that this is absolutely *temporary*.

Once your first conversation is over, it will only get easier. In fact, it will start to get easier in the first two minutes of your conversation! Just hang in there and soon enough you'll start to get into the flow of things.

How to Set Up Your Computer for a Skype Language Exchange

When I have a speaking session on Skype, I make sure that my computer desktop is set up in an optimal way. There are a few different windows you should have open on your computer while you're chatting with a native speaker:

Your list of phrases and keywords in a notepad document

- An online dictionary like wordreference.com to find words in your target language
- An automatic translator, like [Google Translate](https://www.google.com/translate), for when you get really stuck

If you have these open in tabs in your browser, or in easily accessible windows, all of the information you'll need during the conversation is at your fingertips and easily accessible. This allows you to focus on practising speaking, rather than scrambling to look things up. Google Translate is far from perfect, but it's a handy crutch to lean on when you're an absolute beginner.

This might seem like “cheating”, since you have the things you want to practise right in front of you. But this is about getting used to speaking in the language. And the fastest way to become comfortable speaking and gain confidence in your ability is to *open your mouth*.

In time, you'll be able to speak without those “cheat sheets” on your computer screen. In fact, using this sort of system, you'll find yourself progressing to new phrases and words much faster than if you were always trying to reproduce them from memory.

Five Tips to Make the Most of Your Skype Language Exchange

Here are a few other tips that can help make your Skype call much more effective:

Tip 1: Open Your Mouth!

The best way to make the most of your Skype language practice is to open your mouth and speak! Enjoy getting to know someone from the other side of the planet.

It's amazing when you think about how technology brings this world closer together. Thanks to this incredible software called Skype, you no longer need to travel thousands of miles to converse with a native speaker!

Tip 2: Use Video, Not Just Voice

To make sure your Skype call is as effective as possible, try to have a video call.

“Can't I just have a voice call?” you might ask, and sure, while that is technically possible, I *highly recommend* you arrange a video call with your native speaker.

Over 90% of communication (especially in conveying emotions) is nonverbal, so body language can play a big part in getting your point across, or understanding what the other person is saying, or being able to gesture when needed.

Seeing the person also gets you used to observing cultural cues that people use when speaking in that language. How someone uses their hands or shows emotion on their face can vary from culture to culture. Seeing it first hand will give you insight into the cultural nuances of how people communicate.

Tip 3: Try the Bingo! Strategy

Another way to make the most of your call is use the “Bingo” strategy, which my partner Lauren came up with. Essentially, Lauren writes down a list of possible things to say, and

plays a bingo game with herself during the call to try and practise all the phrases on the list. Each time she says a phrase, it gets crossed off the list. If she crosses off all of them, it's Bingo!.

Tip 4: Use Technology to Your Advantage

Try recording your Skype conversation to review later on. (To do this, always get permission first from your teacher, and don't share the video unless you get permission for that, too.) This is easier to do if you are just saving the audio, since free software like Audacity can handle that in the background for you.

If you record your session, you'll be able to look back and figure out that word you didn't understand, or watch again to remember all the words you wanted to say but didn't know how. This way, you'll be better prepared for next time.

You can also ask your teacher to incorporate Google Doc documentation, screen sharing, or other technologies into your lessons, as I outlined in the chapter 8.

Tip 5: Review Your Notes After the Call

Lastly, don't close your computer the moment your Skype call ends.

Instead, spend an extra ten minutes looking back at the notes in the Skype chat box. What words did your teacher type out that you didn't know? What new phrases should you add to your study list or Anki deck? Were there any conversation topics that you struggled with?

This "debriefing" time is so important to make sure that everything you just learned doesn't get lost, but gets reincorporated into your study strategy.

Still not convinced that you need to chat with native speakers? I'm not done with you yet! Let's explore, using a real-world example from one of my most "controversial" language missions, Mandarin Chinese, why stepping outside your comfort zone is so important in language learning.

Chapter 10: The Only Way to Get Far Quickly is to Get Out of Your Comfort Zone

One problem with seeing the end-result of any feat, is not understanding the processes that went on to get to that point. As my friend Khatzumoto said to me once:

“Olympic coverage really ticks me off... you can’t just go up to a person on game day and say how talented they are. So I came up with this rule, that in order to earn the right to watch the Olympics you should have to watch all of their training too!”

This issue of ignoring the work that person had to go through to get to the point you see him is a huge problem in language learning. It’s easy to see someone speak a foreign language and *dismiss that person* as a “genius”, or say that it just comes naturally to them. As if it was their destiny, or a universe-conspired explosion of luck. This is discouraging as each of us thinks about how much we have to struggle, and study and fail because we *don’t* have natural talent.

While I will always strive to learn as quickly as I can, the fact of the matter is that I can’t, and no other learner can, **skip** the frustration involved and required to reach a useful level in a foreign language. When people first come across my blog articles or videos, they sometimes have the false presumption that I perhaps claim to go to the country, instantly make dozens of friends and party all the time in glamorous James-Bond style and magically speak the language at the end; it’s just not fair, so it can’t be true. Learning a language takes hard work, and since spending “*only*” 3 months on it isn’t hard work, I must be lying.

But here’s the thing. Three months is a **really long time**. It’s not about counting the months, but counting the hours and the quality of those hours that makes the difference. A lot of my time, **especially initially**, is spent quite a bit outside of my comfort zone, and actually being tremendously frustrated. This is something that very few learners do much, even if they spend “lots of time” studying.

The only way to get anywhere meaningful is through hard work

And I’ll let you in on a little secret that those who think I party my way to fluency don’t know: I pour blood, sweat, tears and a crapload of sacrifices into my language learning. More than the vast majority of those who have been “learning the language for years” can ever imagine. It’s about priorities and insane devotion to the task, not simply “working hard”. This is something that anyone else can do, but sadly most don’t.

One reason it will indeed take you years to learn a language is if you **make sure you are comfortable** the entire time. Stay indoors with software that mostly requires that you just click a few buttons, sit down with a book or go for a pleasant jog with a podcast on, go to a class and let the teacher do all the talking, or do exercises only at the level assigned to you. Even if you are pouring everything into studying hard, is that *really* trying as hard as you can? Working hard is not the same as *living* hard.

This isn’t good enough. The real world presents you with problems and learning opportu-

nities **before you are ready**. The more you are exposed to them, the faster you'll be *forced* to learn.

To illustrate this, let me share a typical day from when I was learning Mandarin, deeply immersed in the middle of my project.

My own long road through the shortcut: a typical day

Most expats: Get up, work, study some vocab in the break, after work get the *weekly* one hour private lesson, and speak in English the entire time, go home and study for an hour, then go out with your English speaking mates for the rest of the night, complaining about how hard Chinese is... in English. Satisfied that two or three entire hours of "hard" work mean he's done his part on the "long road" to speak the language *some day*.

Me: Wake up to a radio in Mandarin telling me the news and desperately force myself to pick out as many words as I can, and wish I knew what was going on in the world after I understand only fragmented basic words. Start off grumpy.

Go somewhere completely different for breakfast today to force myself to get out of the lazy routine I was getting into, since my favourite place already knows what I want and I just confirm it with two or three of the same words. It's possible I'll order the wrong thing because of this. Order in broken Mandarin, with no more pointing and just saying "that" and consider it a success if I get what I wanted. Starting the day off with the wrong breakfast is damn annoying, but you can bet I won't make the mistake again next time.

I really could have done with that filling hot egg and spinach muffin they have at my usual place across the road... but deal with the fact that a breakfast is a breakfast. At least I ordered it in a way that forced me to practise beyond repeating the same words I already know.

Study for several hours, then after doing work for several hours after that (yes, I have to work too!) get out of the books and out of the house to do the important spoken project of that day (e.g. explain my way into having my cell phone repaired, go get a quick tea somewhere and force myself to ask a non-tea related question of the waitress, ask directions to something that I know the answer to so I can get used to expected vocab, record a video in Mandarin for YouTube – anything that forces me to speak the language). Every experience is like pulling teeth as I am way out of my comfort zone, but each time I learn something important and remember the minor victories.

Then it's time for the gym! But treadmills and dumbbells are boring. Instead I go to **dance lessons** included in my membership. An entire hour of instructions being shouted at me and others... in Mandarin of course. Trying to divide my attention between mimicking the instructor's body movements precisely, and trying to figure out if I can contextually figure out what he's saying and learn some new words. End the hour exhausted physically *and* mentally.

Go to a crowded café with lots of people speaking and try to study there until they close. Studying is the **easy** part. Sitting in a comfy chair with nice music and nobody pressuring me or waiting for me to say what I want to say... I could do this all day! Which is exactly why I shouldn't...

An expat walks in with his local girlfriend, speaking in English, and is soon joined by several expat friends. I sigh about the fact that I still don't know anyone in the city yet (I'm certainly not too shy to make new friends, just not able to do it effectively in the local language yet and not interested in the slippery slope of hanging out "just a little" with English speaking expats), and put my earphones on with the radio (some easy listening station, since love songs have much easier to distinguish slower lyrics) as I continue to study. My time to shine and really get into the meat of the part of language learning I love most will come in a few short weeks. All this studying is based on the issues I actually have with speaking, not on blindly going through courses.

Come home, and try to communicate with my terribly broken Chinese in an online chatroom. Succeed in convincing someone to meet up with me next week! Then realise how incredibly unprepared I am to sit down with someone and talk for more than 5 seconds in Mandarin. Anyway, I'll figure that out when the time comes...

Then finally it's time to "reward" myself with two hours of non-work-related English to end my day, but I keep it entirely online to make sure I actually speak as little as possible or *no* English at all in that day. Seeing the outside world again actually makes me miss home, and someone following my YouTube channel leaves a discouraging comment on one of my Mandarin videos I uploaded for some accountability. Rather than relaxing, this just makes me more tense.

Then I remember that there is a big X at the top right of the window and I can turn them off... and I go to bed to start the process all over again the next day.

Totally worth it!

OK, this incredibly intensive learning day early in my project may sound horrible, but because I kept up this work over three months, I got rewarded with a new language that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Even though I didn't reach fluency in those initial three months, I did get to a "conversational" level (B1, or lower intermediate at a spoken level in Mandarin, confirmed independently by a Mandarin school in Beijing), which was enough to be able to converse with Chinese people on a pretty decent range of topics if they were willing to speak to me slowly. That was an achievement I was very proud of.

And the best part? After the intensive learning period, I stopped studying, hit the road and went on an incredible adventure spanning thousands of kilometres through mainland China. I met and genuinely talked with a Kung Fu master, a Buddhist monk, I made friends on my train journeys, and I got to see a side of China that most westerners could never dream of seeing, all thanks to doing it through Mandarin. If you don't believe me, it's all on my YouTube channel!

Everyone struggles, but some struggle more efficiently

It's not fun to be stuck in that lower level stage of learning, and the whole point of it is that if you want to stick to your guns and be 100% devoted, you *can't* start sharing your frustrations with anyone in person yet, because you don't even *know the word for "frustration"*. But I know from experience how much all this hard work can pay off in terms of friendships and exposure to sides of a culture many passers-through never get to see.

In the first video I recorded of myself speaking Mandarin at the start of my project, you can see in my face how much I'm trying to think to force basic words out of me (or in this case... ba...sic...syll...a...bles), and may appreciate that maybe there is no *quantum leap* of merrily skipping through frustration for **anyone**.

Everyone struggles, and even those of us who learn languages full time will have experiences like my Mandarin one.

I feel like the myth that you are “smart” if you learn languages, makes too many people unwilling to accept that they will not be able to argue politics and deeply share their feelings if they dared to speak in their first weeks, before they are “ready”. **Any idiot can learn a language**, and knowing this means that I can accept that **perhaps I have to be that idiot**.

You feel really stupid when you try to use a language in situations that are outside of your comfort zone, and that's precisely why you need MORE of these situations, *not* less of them.

If you charge into the frustration, embrace it, and fill up all your free time with it, then you WILL get to the other side **much quicker**. You “get it out of your system”, rather than letting it linger. Too many learners only do these *annoying practice things*, once in awhile, and it's what slows them down tremendously. Doing it the hard and intensive way is damn stressful, and I can confirm that. I'm not interested in the *easiest* way to learn a language, I want **the most efficient way**.

Enough of this *easing yourself in gently* nonsense. That's precisely why it's taking you so much time.

I've been to hell and back several times by now and know the path intimately.

Totally worth it every time.

Want more? Try my free *Speak in a Week* course

Thanks for reading!

If you enjoyed this book and want to try out my approach to language learning, then please check out my free *Speak in a Week* course.

Speak in a Week gives you everything you need to step outside your comfort zone and start speaking a new language in just 7 days.

You can sign up to *Speak in a Week* here: fi3m.com/speak-in-a-week. It's free!

Benny Lewis

Founder, Fluent in 3 Months

Resources for Language Learners

I publish new articles and videos every week about language hacking. For more language hacking tips and inspiration, you can:

- Subscribe to my [YouTube channel](#)
- Like [Fluent in 3 Months](#) on Facebook, and join our thriving community
- Follow me on [Twitter](#)
- Check out the [Fluent in 3 Months blog](#)

Whatever language you're learning, I'd recommend you check out the following resources:

- **Speak in a Week** is my free 7-day course for language learners. It gives you everything you need to step outside your comfort zone and start speaking a new language in just 7 days. After you've finished the course, you'll receive my weekly language hacker's newsletter, with all the latest news and tips on language learning. You can sign up to *Speak in a Week* here: fi3m.com/speak-in-a-week
- **italki** is a marketplace for online language tutors and teachers, and is my go-to place for finding a language tutor. It's also ideal for connecting with native speakers and finding conversation partners. You'll find tutors for all major languages, and dozens of lesser-spoken languages, on italki. You can read my review of italki here: fi3m.com/italki-review.
- The **Add1Challenge** is a community of language learners on a mission to learn a new language. The central premise of the Add1Challenge is this: hold a 15 minute conversation in a new language after just 90 days of learning. Check out the *Fluent in 3 Months* review of the Add1Challenge here: fi3m.com/add1challenge.
- **Innovative Language Podcasts** are available for 30+ languages. They're produced to a very high standard and are structured to help you learn as much as possible, as quickly as possible. You can read my thoughts on their podcasts here: fi3m.com/language-learning-podcasts.
- **HelloTalk** is a cool language-learning app that connects you directly with native speakers, and provides an interface to text and speak with them from your smartphone. Here's my review of HelloTalk: fi3m.com/hellotalk-review.
- **Couchsurfing** is a way of finding free accommodation by crashing on someone's couch while you're travelling. You can also offer your own couch to other couchsurfers, or simply meet up with fellow members at events in your area. It's a good way to meet native speakers of other languages. I share my experience of couchsurfing here: fi3m.com/couchsurfing.
- **Meetup.com** is a tool that helps people who share a common interest (such as languages!) find other people with similar interests in their city. It's useful for connecting with other language learners.

- **Skype** is a free app that allows you to make voice and video calls over the Internet. It's the main tool I use for chatting with language tutors.
- **Anki** (available for iOS, Android and desktop computers) uses Spaced Repetition Systems (SRS) to help you memorize vocabulary. It does this by prompting you to remember words when you're just on the verge of forgetting them. It's scientifically proven to be very effective. You can read about how I use Anki here: fi3m.com/spaced-repetition. Other language-learning apps that use SRS include Memrise and Duolingo.
- **MosaLingua** (available for iOS, Android and desktop computers) is a flashcard app that contains pre-made flashcards for you to study, complete with native speaker recordings. It also lets you create your own personalised flashcards. It's available for six languages so far (English, French, Spanish, Italian, German and Portuguese).

Reviews of products mentioned in this book:

- [Pimsleur review](#)
- [Rosetta Stone review](#)
- [Duolingo review](#)