

Gathering information

Learning a language is simply a process of gathering and applying information about its *pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary*. You can extract this information from textbooks and dictionaries. However, most cheap textbooks are muddling and leave information out, so to get a reliable account you'll have to consult many sources.

For **pronunciation**, you need a list of the language's sounds and a description of each. Every language has its own specific set of sounds - 29 in Spanish, 44 in English. Find out what those sounds are, and learn to make them. But watch out for textbooks that confuse sounds with letters, and remember that tapes will not help you unless you've researched the sounds first. You'll also need to know the rules for converting spelling into sounds. This is obviously much easier if you've established beforehand an inventory of possible sounds.

For **grammar**, rely on academic textbooks. Elementary textbooks are generally so messy and confused that you'll soon outgrow them. But don't imagine that you need to work through an academic textbook in sequence - just pick out what you need as you need it.

A **vocabulary** of about 600 words will get you going. Collect it from elementary textbooks and phrase-books. Start by learning a lot of 'form' words - *I, you, he, she, in front of, behind, one, two, three* - and just a few 'content' words like *eggs* or *want*. Then get really fluent at combining these into short phrases. You can fit in flashier 'content' words like *marinate* or *chain-saw* later. Build your vocabulary by reading everything you can find. And don't worry if you can't remember the words for things that don't interest you - that's normal.

Learning

The secret of learning a language is to treat it as a *set of systems* rather than as an accumulation of words and phrases.

One system is the **sound-system**. If you know all the sounds in the language (30 to 40 in most languages) and how they behave in combination, you can pronounce any sentence in the language. So a little learning - you can learn a sound-system in a couple of hours - is very productive.

Another system is **grammar**, which defines how words combine to make meaningful sentences. Here again small efforts bring big returns. If you understand the structure of *I really love popcorn*, you can model an unimaginable variety of sentences upon it, ranging from *Salt usually melts ice* to *My sister absolutely detested Jimi Hendrix*. And once you know all the grammar (as you do in your native language), you can formulate all possible sentences in that language!

Vocabulary too has a systematic side, which you can exploit through word-families. *Load, upload, download* and *reload* have an obvious relationship that makes them easy to learn in English. Noticing these relationships in your foreign language will make it easier to remember the words.

Try to **learn the language 'from the inside'** - that is, without recourse to your native language. If the meaning of a word is clear in context, don't look it up; if you can't remember a word you want to use, work round it. This will mean that you guess and make mistakes, but that's a normal part of learning. The aim after all is not to do translations, but to master an alternative set of expressive resources.

Practising

To become fluent in the language you need to *practise* it in just the same way as any other performer practises.

Sportsmen, musicians and actors divide the task into **separate pieces of technique**, and practise the individual elements until they become automatic. Only then can they give proper attention to the wider performance. Ordinary people have the same experience driving their cars - it's only when control of the car requires no thought that you really develop road-sense.

The pieces of technique in language-learning are the **fragmentary utterances and phrases** that illustrate the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. So if you're practising uvular 'r', for example, you'll start with a collection of words with 'r' in them, and if you're practising placement of the object pronouns you'll create a set of sentences modelled on *Don't hit me! Don't drink it!* You can find practice material in textbooks, and you can make it up by ringing the changes on textbook material.

But the real trick in practising is to **talk to yourself aloud** the whole time. Do it in bed and while washing the dishes, in the street and while walking the dog. You learn a language by using it, and it doesn't in fact matter if there's no-one there to listen.

So speak to your **family, friends, pets, toys and teddy-bear** in your new language. Write notes and shopping-lists in it, then read them to your friends and teddy-bear. Your friends and family won't understand you, but they never understood you in your old language anyway.

Using the language

Speaking a foreign language is just as lonely and exposed as performing on any stage or in any sports arena. There's nothing but your training and skill to support you in the task in hand. In real conversations there are no grammars or dictionaries or encouraging teachers at your elbow - the material is either in your head, or lost.

You speak a foreign language to enrich your communication with other people. So you must present to others an image of yourself which you are happy with, and this will determine how well you need to learn the foreign language. If, as a native English speaker, you think that people speaking English with a small vocabulary and a thick accent are full of foreign charm, you might decide to be like that in your foreign language; but if you think this kind of foreigner is in the end irritating, you'll want to do better than that. In short, you need to reach a level where you can convey an image of yourself with which you feel comfortable.

You'll also need to adopt a linguistic identity. You have an identity in your native language - you speak with a particular social or regional accent, you prefer some words and phrases over others. In your foreign language you'll find you're doing the same; but since you're now doing it as an adult rather than as a child you have more control over which identity to adopt.

Psychologists have noted that learning a foreign language brings about a marked development of the personality. It also gives the learner an additional identity. As a famous dignitary put it, 'You're worth as many people as you know languages.' What fun you're going to have!

Derek Rogers

I specialise in helping language-learners to learn, and use applied linguistics to simplify the language-learning task.

My courses are run on a supported self-study basis: after an initial assessment of your aims and needs, I provide you with course-material and a flow of assignments that lead you towards mastery of the language. You study the material and work on the assignments at your own pace, using the tuition sessions to check your work and clarify any problems.

This approach means that you can work at your own pace. It's also designed to help learners solve their own language-learning problems, and so learn independently.

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The Language Learner's Guide

What information do you need about your chosen language? Where can you get it? How can you learn quickly and efficiently - and how can you practise effectively?

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