
Fluent in 3 MONTHS



*How Anyone at Any Age
Can Learn to Speak Any Language
from Anywhere in the World*

BENNY LEWIS

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

My Story, Your Passion

Your story, like mine, begins and ends with passion—the surest path to learning a new language.

CHAPTER 1

Destroying Twenty Common Language Learning Myths

Stop making excuses. There's simply no reason you "can't" learn a new language, and I'll tell you why.

CHAPTER 2

Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It

Do away with vague daydreams, such as "learn Spanish," by setting specific end goals within specific time frames and incorporating new language learning techniques to achieve concrete results.

CHAPTER 3

How to Learn Thousands of Words Quickly

If you don't have the memory of a supercomputer, don't worry. This chapter explains why we forget things and teaches a much more efficient—and fun—way to remember foreign words.

CHAPTER 4

Immersion Without Buying a Plane Ticket

You don't need to be in a foreign country to learn the language. You can do it from the comfort of your home or local community.

CHAPTER 5

Speaking from Day One

Start speaking a new language right away with easy-to-follow "cheats" for when you don't know the words you want to say.

CHAPTER 6

Tips for Starting Specific Languages

Learning a specific language is easier than you think. Here I tell you why.

CHAPTER 7

From Fluency to Mastery

Strive toward fluency and beyond by coming back to the academic aspects better suited to this part of the language learning process.

CHAPTER 8

How to Get Mistaken for a Native Speaker

It's time to go beyond fluency by adapting to the local culture, until a stranger mistakes you for a native!

CHAPTER 9

Hyperpolyglot: When One Is Just Not Enough

~~Take language learning to the next level. Speak multiple languages without mixing them up or forgetting the one(s) you've already mastered.~~

CHAPTER 10

Free and Cheap Language Learning 2.0

Study a new language beyond spoken practice sessions with invaluable—and mostly free—resources

Conclusion

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like, first and foremost, to thank all the many thousands of people who have showed me, over the span of a decade, how to have more faith in all people, from all countries, to appreciate communication, and to not worry about a few mistakes. I have almost never been judged as a beginning language learner, and it's thanks to these wonderful people of countless nationalities that I have been able to discover so many different cultures and make lifelong friends. Their patience has been infinite, and I am glad to say that they will be as kind to any reader of this book—any new language learner—as they were with me.

Also, a huge thank-you to Jorge, the first polyglot I met in my life, who is from Brazil and whose name I couldn't even pronounce when I met him. He inspired me to get started (bumpy as the start was) on this wonderful road to language learning.

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My Story, Your Passion

Your story, like mine, begins and ends with passion—the surest path to learning a new language.

In late July 2003, just a couple of weeks after my twenty-first birthday, I moved to Valencia, Spain. To help me adjust to life in a foreign country, I enrolled in a Spanish class.

It was a small class, and it was taught entirely in Spanish, which was a bit of a problem for me because I only understood English. I had just graduated with a degree in electronic engineering, and I had barely passed the German and Irish* courses I took in high school. Languages were definitely not my thing.

After several classes, I was getting absolutely nowhere. Each lesson ended with the other students wearing great big satisfied smiles on their faces. I knew they had figured out something about the language that they didn't know before, while I still couldn't understand a single word. My ego was destroyed. I was, without a doubt, the worst student in the class, and as I walked home with my head hung low, I couldn't help thinking, *It's not fair! Why were those guys blessed with the language learning gene and I wasn't? I'm never going to learn Spanish.*

After six months in Spain, I could barely muster up the courage to ask how much something cost or where the bathroom was. I really started to think I would never learn Spanish. I began to worry my experience immersed in a different country would be a total failure. I was convinced my destiny was to spend the rest of my life speaking only English.

Fast-forward seven years. One night in Budapest, I ended up at a “couchsurfing” party at a local bar with an international crowd. I confidently strolled in and said hello to everyone *in Hungarian*, one of the most notoriously difficult languages in the world. I started chatting with a local, *in Hungarian*, about my progress with his native language. I had been learning it only for about five weeks, but I was still able to have this rudimentary chat with him.

Next, I noticed a slight Brazilian Portuguese accent from the guy speaking English to my left. I asked, “Você é brasileiro?” (Are you Brazilian?), and when he told me, in Portuguese, that he was from Rio, I immediately switched to my Carioca accent, using slang from his own city, telling him how much I missed it. He was shocked to hear an Irish guy speak his own Portuguese dialect in a random bar in Budapest!

Then I recognized a Spanish friend of mine across the table and immediately switched to fluent Spanish, asking her how *her* Hungarian was coming along. Later, a couple from Quebec arrived, and I turned on my Quebec accent and expressions while speaking French. We exchanged contact information and made plans to hang out the next day.

That night I also managed to use some Italian and Esperanto and wowed a Thai tourist with a few phrases of basic Thai, using all the right tones. I even flirted in German with a German girl I saw regularly at these meetings.

In one evening I spoke eight languages (including a little English) casually, socially, and naturally. I switched between them effortlessly, without mixing them up, and—more important—made some

amazing new friends in the process.

Since then I've learned several other languages, and at the time of writing this, I can confidently use twelve languages in varying degrees of proficiency, from conversational (in Dutch, Mandarin Chinese, and American Sign Language) to certified mastery (in Spanish) and everything in between for the other nine. I understand the basics of another twelve languages on top of these. I also run Fluentin3months.com, the world's largest language learning blog, which, to date, has helped millions of people around the world learn a new language.

All of this is true despite the fact that I spoke only English until the age of twenty-one and did poorly in my attempts to learn languages in school.

How did this happen? How did I go from dropping out of my Spanish language class to being able to converse in more than a dozen languages? Simply by changing how I approach new languages.

The Way to Learn a Language Is to Live It

One of the biggest issues with a traditional approach to language learning is that the benefits of picking up a new language are constantly postponed. Study this and study that and *then*, if you're lucky, in a few years' time, you'll eventually understand the language. As well as being far from the truth, this approach removes the fun and the *life* from the process.

In many education systems, especially in English-speaking countries, languages are taught the same way as any other subject, like geography or history. Teachers provide the "facts" (vocabulary) so that the student will "know" the language. Or, as in mathematics, students do the exercises to understand the "rules" (grammar).

Except on rare occasions, this approach does not produce *speakers* of the target language, so something clearly needs to be fixed. A language is a means of communication and should be *lived* rather than taught.

A teacher's primary role should be as a language facilitator. A teacher should make sure students use the target language at whatever level they happen to be at, rather than keep them quiet while he or she does all the talking, trying to transfer the informational components of the language into the students' brains.

In high school, I had to learn Irish. It was mandatory and, in order to gain admission to university, I needed to pass my exams. As a result, I only cared about learning enough Irish to pass; I didn't care about the language itself.

My attitude toward Irish changed completely when I actually took the time to live in the Gaeltacht region of Ireland, where people still speak the language, and I started to make friends using it.

The second language I took in high school was German. I took German because Germany is an important economy in Europe, and I figured it would look good to have this language on my résumé. German language skills would help me stand out, especially since most people in my year were studying French. Once again, I didn't care about the German language; I just thought learning it might give me secondary benefits. And, of course, I barely retained anything. I thought German was nothing more than *der, die, das* tables of impossible-to-learn grammar. And I imagined Germans were robots that automatically spit out grammatically correct sentences.

That is, until I met actual Germans and saw firsthand how interesting and fun they were. So fun, in fact, I wanted to get to know them better. This way of thinking allowed me to stop thinking of the

German language as a barrier between Germans and me, but instead as a bridge I could cross communicate with them. In both cases, my initial tangential motivations for learning a language were replaced by a direct motivation to live that language and use it as a means of communication and connection.

This is how language courses should work. The best tend to veer away from the traditional approach of drilling grammar and word lists into us, or providing us with old, boring, and irrelevant texts. Instead, the best courses encourage us to play games and role-play in the language. They let students speak the language with one another, which—as I realized with both of the languages I had learned poorly in high school and then much better as an adult—is the truest means of communication. As a result of speaking the language right away, students start to *acquire* the language rather than *learn* it as they would other academic subjects.

What's Your Motivation?

Let me ask you something: When you first tried to take on a language you were interested in, did you think something like, *If I learn this language then I'll get this benefit*—some benefit that had nothing to do with intrinsically communicating in that language or getting to know a foreign country's culture or people?

“Benefits,” like career advancement, impressing people, prestige, passing an exam, crossing something off your bucket list, or other similar reasons, are examples of tangential motivations that have nothing to do with using the language itself.

For so many language learners, that motivation to learn a language is more often than not extrinsic rather than intrinsic. They have no true passion for the language; their only motivation is almost entirely for the side benefits they'd theoretically get from speaking a new language. Recognizing the bridges to *people* that language learning opens up as opposed to benefits you may receive someday, is a key ingredient to making language learning faster, more fun, and more efficient.

The Missing Ingredient: Passion

In this book, I focus on independent learners, rather than those sitting in classrooms. Even if you are taking a classroom course, whether it is taught efficiently or not, you need to be an efficient learner in your free time. When you love learning a language enough to have it fill your free time, then your passion can truly blossom. You can find many new motivations beyond extrinsic ones.

This is not to say that these factors automatically lead to failure; success in your career, for instance, can be a very effective motivating factor. The catch, however, is that these side benefits can't be the main motivators for you to learn a language if you want to learn the language better. You must intrinsically want to speak that language for the language or culture itself.

When I eventually rebooted my attempts to learn Spanish, I put aside these superficial reasons—that someday Spanish might make me impressive or perhaps even more employable. Instead, I started to learn Spanish specifically to use Spanish with other human beings. This made all the difference. I genuinely wanted to communicate in Spanish and make friends through their native tongue. I also wanted to get to know Spain beyond the superficial experience I had had until then.

I was no longer motivated by benefits I might get months or years in the future, or by the idea that speaking Spanish would “make me cool”; I was genuinely passionate about learning the language in order to communicate directly with and understand other people through reading, watching, and listening to Spanish.

So take a moment to ask yourself, what is your motivation for learning a new language? Are you learning a language for the “wrong” reasons? Even if you indeed need the benefits that result from learning a language, like advancing your career, can you mentally put aside the long-term benefits and embrace learning the language for the inherent beauty of it and the many doors it will open for you? If you change your thinking in this way, all the side benefits will come, but they will come much faster because your new focus will make learning a language happen more quickly and efficiently.

The missing ingredient, and the single thing I have found that separates successful language learners from unsuccessful ones, is a passion for the language itself. For successful language learners, acquiring a new language is the reward.

Give Yourself Goose Bumps

So how do you develop this passion if extrinsic benefits have been clouding your vision?

For a start, seek out movies and art and history from the country where your target language is spoken, listen to music in that language, read books and magazines, find as many sources of audio, video, and text online as you can, and absolutely spend time with native speakers—which you will notice I’ve dedicated an entire chapter to, without requiring that you travel to their countries.

Even when I know I am going to a country and have my flight booked, or even when I’m in the country itself, I can get lazy and make very slow progress *unless* I make that language a true part of my life. Doing so lets me grow passionate for the language.

Here’s a good time to tell you about my friend Khatzumoto. After speaking and reading Japanese exclusively for just eighteen months, he could read technical materials and conduct business correspondence and job interviews, all in Japanese. He ultimately landed a job in Japan as a software engineer at a gigantic corporation based in Tokyo.

The amazing thing is that Khatzumoto reached this stage by living his life in Japanese . . . while in Utah! He filled his world with Japanese *virtually*. He watched anime, read manga, consumed his favorite sci-fi series dubbed in Japanese, and surrounded himself with everything Japanese during every spare moment of his day, even though he was a full-time computer science student. By integrating his target language into his day-to-day living, he gave himself no escape route; he had no choice but to live most of his days in Japanese. As a result, his passion for the language grew. Today his motto for learning Japanese, or for learning any language, remains “You don’t know a language until you live it. You don’t learn a language, you get used to it.”

Nothing creates passion for a language more than using it. Similarly, nothing I say about why you should learn a new language will be more convincing than the first time you understand your first sentence, or the first time you make yourself understood, in a different language. These moments will give you goose bumps, and the immense feeling of satisfaction that comes with them will stay with you forever, as well as thousands of other positive experiences that will follow.

The passion ingredient is what makes learning languages worthwhile; you simply have to live the language in whatever way you can to have your passion sparked. Spend time with natives of the

language, listen to streamed radio, watch TV shows and movies, or read books in the language, and you will spark your passion, which will motivate much more progress than any side benefit could ever hope to inspire.

How Far Are You Willing to Go?

Moses McCormick is a well-known polyglot who often posts online videos in languages that he is learning. He can communicate, in varying degrees—from knowing a few phrases to being able to converse very well—in about fifty languages. When he was trying to improve his Hmong, an Asian language rarely known to Westerners, he told me the one place where he could consistently practice with native speakers was in online chat rooms. That’s all well and good, but one major obstacle, he said, was that most chat rooms were often filled with men interested only in meeting girls. They weren’t interested in continuing a conversation with another guy.

So what did Moses do? He created another screen name and logged in as a woman (a virtual sex change operation, if you will, only taking just an instant and totally reversible). Even when he said he was married, he still found that people were much more eager to chat.

Would you go to such lengths to get some practice time in your target language? If not, then maybe you aren’t passionate enough to get the results!

I’m obviously not saying that logging into a chat room as another gender is a prerequisite for speaking another language, but going to such lengths and being willing to do whatever it takes, no matter what the level of embarrassment, will greatly improve your chances of being successful.

The Right Mentality Will Launch You Forward

Success in language learning doesn’t come from having the perfect circumstances or require a perfect language learning system. Success relies heavily on facing challenges with the right mentality, having motivation and passion, and sticking to the learning process until you charge through the “brick wall” in your way.

Someone with mountains of passion will always find a way to progress in his or her target language, even if that person uses inefficient learning approaches or gets stuck on plateaus for long periods of time. There are successful language learners who learn very differently from me—sometimes slower, sometimes faster, sometimes with better language skills or more languages under their belts. Without fail, however, the one thing we always have in common is passion.

In fact, every language learning challenge I have ever taken on has had its disappointing failure. I’ve had moments when I felt like giving up, when I saw others doing much better than I was, and when I had trouble finding people to practice with. I’ve struggled with conversations that went nowhere, had some rough starts, hit plateaus, forgotten words I should have known, and experienced countless other obstacles that made me feel like a failure, all of which led to many hours of frustration. But I kept going because I *wanted* to keep going. I had a passion for language, and that’s how I’ve been able to learn to speak twelve languages and counting.

Once you learn one new language, you’re off and running. Learning the first foreign language gives you the skills to learn a second, and then a third, faster and more efficiently.

In the following pages, I'll show you how to master a new language, with the lessons I've learned and the techniques I've applied while transitioning from a monoglot to a polyglot, plus give you solutions to—or ways around—difficult problems. Believe me, none of it involves re-engineering your DNA to add in the language gene. Instead, this collection of lessons can be used by any language learner, at any stage or any age, and it includes the same lessons millions of people have already been using on my blog: Fluentin3months.com.

Follow Up

千里之行，始于足下

Qiānlǐ zhī xíng, shǐ yú zú xià.

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

—CHINESE PROVERB

The first step in language learning is to make the commitment to do whatever it takes to make your project a success. If you have the passion to do what it takes, no matter what that may require, then this will ensure that you will, soon, be able to speak your target language.

For more on my story and other thoughts on the importance of passion in language learning, check out fi3m.com/intro, where there are videos, links to sites of people mentioned in this chapter, and extra updates designed specifically for readers of this introduction.

Destroying Twenty Common Language Learning Myths

Stop making excuses. There's simply no reason you "can't" learn a new language, and I'll tell you why.

I can confidently say that any person on earth can learn a second language, no matter what their age, intelligence, working or living situation is, or what their past attempts to learn languages have been like. When our mentality, motivation, passion, and attitude are kept strong, we have the momentum required to charge on toward language fluency.

But there's a catch. Even with the best intentions and most enthusiastic starts, we are all bound to run into challenges along the way—sometimes before we even begin or at the very first step of the journey—that prevent us from really starting to learn the language.

The thing is, while these obstacles may feel like brick walls preventing us from continuing on our path toward speaking a language, many of them are actually myths that exist nowhere but in our minds.

The reasons we give for why we can't learn a language often have us second-guessing ourselves, wondering if all this language learning business isn't for us at all. Many may feel too old, untalented, too busy, or located too far from any native speakers. There are a host of reasons, excuses, and discouragements we tell ourselves, have been told by others, or just presume to be true. Well, there is no good excuse for not learning a language and advancing toward fluency.

I have personally talked to thousands of language learners, with millions more reading my blog over the years, and I have heard about pretty much every possible setback learners have had (and I've had quite a few myself). In this chapter, I share with you the twenty most common retorts people have given me when I tell them they can, and should, learn a second language—some of these you have probably felt yourself—and I'll explain why each one of them is baseless, or at least has a good solution, as well as many examples of people who have overcome this challenge before.

1. Aren't Adult Language Learners at a Disadvantage?

One of the most common reasons many people give for not even trying to learn a language is that once someone passes a certain age, learning a new language is pointless. This almost feels like common sense. "Children are better language learners," people often tell me, "and after a certain age, you simply can't learn a language."

I know I certainly felt too old already, even at the age of twenty-one. However, the idea has never held any water or been demonstrated as true by any serious scientific study. Instead there is only a general trend of adults not learning languages as well as children—but this may be true for reasons totally unrelated to age. Adults struggle with new languages most especially because of a misguided learning approach, their learning environment, or their lack of enthusiasm for the task, all of which can be changed.

Fluency in a second language is definitely possible for *all* ages. The “I’m too old” excuse is one of many self-fulfilling prophecies we’ll be coming across in this chapter. By telling yourself you are too old, you decide to not put in the work and, thus, don’t learn the language. The vicious cycle continues.

The idea that babies have an advantage over us because their brains are hardwired to learn languages while ours aren’t is also not the case. No matter what language you are taking on, you have a vast head start on any baby learning that language, simply because you cannot start from scratch as an adult learner! Starting from scratch is what is truly impossible. There is a huge difference between learning your first language and learning your second. Without the thousands of words that your second language may have in common with your first, a baby has to do much more work, work that we adult learners so merrily take for granted.

It took you years to be able to confidently distinguish between all the sounds in your native language. When you start to learn a new language as an adult, there are so many learning processes you get to skip that babies have to spend years working on. How about not needing to learn how to distinguish between sounds like an *m* and an *n*? Or all the other sounds that the majority of languages have in common? You also don’t have to concern yourself with developing the muscles in your voice box and tongue in order to even *attempt* to make noises with them. Or with training your ear to be able to distinguish between male and female voices, or between the particular voices of family members and friends, not just other noises in your environment.

Adult language learners also have the advantage of already having been exposed to years of context in universal human interaction, which indicates when someone is angry, shouting, or asking a question, or the many other aspects of international body language, intonation, and speech volume. One study at the University of California, Los Angeles, actually found that an incredible 93 percent of communication of emotions is nonverbal. And a majority of nonverbal communication is universal. A laugh is a laugh, across the world.

While it’s possible that some of these communication cues are built into our DNA to be recognized automatically, babies still need to develop them. They have all this extra work ahead of them, learning how to communicate in general terms before they can even begin to incorporate specific language blocks like vocabulary and grammar.

But a language is not just vocabulary and grammar; it’s an entire spectrum of communication from the clothes we wear to our posture, hand gestures, personal space, pauses, volume, intonation, and a host of other verbal and nonverbal cues, most of which are universal among modern cultures. (There are definitely exceptions, but if you compare them to the number of similarities, the latter will greatly outnumber the former.)

An infant picks all of this up over many years before he or she can adequately communicate with adults and other children. This means we adults have much more time and energy to focus on the much smaller aspects of communication, of how words go together. Babies have it hard, and your children still need serious tweaking, even at the age of six or so. This is why it takes years before children can be considered good speakers. But this shouldn’t be the case for us. When it comes to language learning, an adult can overtake a baby any day because an adult has much less work to do.

Even if you’re with me so far, you may still say that adults are definitely worse off than preteens and early teenagers, who already speak one language well. You might think that their brains are “fresher” or process new information more quickly than ours. Why bother competing with that?

This sounds logical enough, but research has shown that it’s not true. A study by the University of Haifa in Israel examined how well different age groups—eight-year-olds, twelve-year-olds, and adults—picked up unexplained grammar rules. The study revealed that the “adults were consistently better

in everything we measured.” *

Adults are not *worse* language learners, but *different* language learners. The real problem with adult language learners is the environment in which we try to learn languages. As mentioned in the introduction, a traditional academic environment is already not efficient for children, but this is even more true for adults. If an adult makes a mistake, other adults are less likely to correct that person because they don't want to insult him or her, but the teacher–student dynamic with children makes this less of a problem.

A child learning a new language after a certain age can also find it quite hard if the material is presented too academically. In their spare time, children are more likely to want to play video games or enjoy activities not related to language learning. We can send them to an immersion school, where they can at least play games with other students in the right language, but they may not want to be there and are often just going because their parents have sent them. Their own rebellious nature may get the better of them and, even in an immersion environment, if they don't want to learn, they won't.

Adults, on the other hand, can actively decide to learn a language and justify doing so with many more reasons than a child may come up with, including a greater degree of passion. They can go out their way to arrange to meet up with people to practice the language. Adults have many more options for language learning strategies, and can control their free time more easily than children can. Being the master of your own destiny has its perks! Resourceful and clever adults can even pick up a helpful book on the topic or read blog posts written by a charming Irish polyglot, for instance.

Adults are also more analytical than children. This creates different sets of advantages for both. Children will indeed be more likely to “pick up” a language with less conscious effort, but this does not mean they are better at it. Adults who put in a conscious effort can keep up at the same rate of progress, even if making that effort is a little more exhausting.

While I prefer to leave grammar aside (more on that later) until I can converse pretty well in the language, when I do get to it, I process the rules and understand the logic behind them much better than a child ever would. Children are better at absorbing a language naturally, but adults do that *and* combine it with a greater capacity to reason why one sentence works one way over another way.

Because of all this—plus implementing a human-centered learning approach—I feel I am a much better language learner now, in my thirties, than I ever was as an eight-, twelve-, sixteen-, or even twenty-year-old. I am getting better at learning languages with age, not worse!

What about when you get much older? I have come across people in their fifties, sixties, seventies, and even older starting with their *first* foreign language and succeeding. I regularly receive e-mails and comments on my blog from learners of these ages who are making fantastic progress in their target languages.

Ultimately, I don't want to argue that adults are *better* language learners than children, because this has the danger of discouraging those who want their children to do better. My point is that we all have our advantages, and it is much more practical to look at what those advantages are than to dwell on and exaggerate any challenges either group has.

It's never too late for an adult of any age to learn a new language.

The true advantage children have over adults is that they are naturally less afraid to make mistakes. Rather than feel this is a stamp for life, we should learn from children. Try to enjoy the language learning process and don't be afraid of a little embarrassment. Laugh at your mistakes and have fun with it, instead of being way too grown up about it or taking every minor slipup so seriously. In this sense, we can definitely learn from children!

Children tend to absorb their first few thousand words entirely by human interaction, where

adults, learning another language, may learn these from textbooks. Learning exactly like a baby is not wise, but we can aim to emulate many of the aspects of a child's learning environment that encourage real communication.

Also, keep in mind that babies and young children effectively have full-time teachers—the parents—who laugh at their mistakes (thinking they are *cute*), have almost infinite patience, and are overjoyed at every success. Imagine if an adult could find a native speaker so motivated to help. These are things you can seek to emulate in your own environment, such as spending more time with native speakers motivated to help you. These are not inherent advantages built into children, but aspects of their environments from which you can draw inspiration.

2. I Don't Have the Language Gene

Lack of talent! Oh, if only I had a penny for every time I heard *this!* Here's a self-fulfilling prophecy if ever there was one.

When I was in school, I repeated to myself, *I don't have the language gene*. Since I didn't have it, I didn't put in the work to really learn German; and since I didn't put in the work, I barely passed my exams and ultimately didn't speak German after five years of lessons in the language. Therefore, I didn't have the language gene.

Do you see a problem with my circular logic here?

There is absolutely no reason to believe in a “language gene,” as if the ability to learn a foreign language is encoded in your genome at conception. The truth is that if a multilingual gene really exists, we must all be born with it. Most of the planet actually speaks *more* than one language. Many places in the West have a huge number of inhabitants who speak two languages, like Quebec, Catalonia, and Switzerland, to name just three. In China, people switch between distinct varieties of Chinese such as Mandarin and Cantonese with ease, and it's quite common in India to come across someone who can converse in five different languages.

In Luxembourg, the language of instruction changes every few years. As a result, children come out of school fluent in French, German, and Luxembourgish. If any of us had been brought up in that environment, we would have learned the same languages just as well, regardless of our genetics.

If you happen to be an American, don't forget that your heritage comes from countries that have plenty of people speaking multiple languages, or that one of your ancestors crossed the ocean perhaps speaking a different language than yours. *Somewhere* in your family tree someone very likely communicated in more than one language. Pulling the genetics card when this is the case in your own family tree is quite silly.

The fact that a monolingual culture breeds monolinguals doesn't say anything about an individual's inherent potential. When it comes to language learning, there is no room for doubt: you decide your own success. Do the necessary work to learn a language, and you'll catch up with—and even overtake—the “naturally talented.”

3. I Don't Have the Time

It's all well and good for those with no full-time job or responsibilities to go gallivanting around the

world and spend all day studying languages, but some of us have to *work*.

Definitely a fair retort, if it were true that successful language learners were only those who practice language learning full-time. But this is very far from what actually happens. If anything, those doing it full-time are a rarity, and pretty much all successful language learners I have met have done it while also working a full-time job, completing their undergraduate studies, helping to raise a family, taking care of loved ones, or juggling a host of other responsibilities.

For instance, the second foreign language I seriously took the time to learn was Italian. And although I did move to Italy while I was learning the language (though you really don't have to, as I discuss later), the job I took in Rome required me to work more than sixty hours a week, so I know better than most what it's like to have a *really* demanding schedule and still find a way to make language learning work.

It's not a question of having enough time. I've seen more cases than I care to list of people who had all day, every day, for many months to learn a language but squandered that time. It's all about *making* time. Even though I only had every other evening free in Rome, I used that tiny amount of time to focus on improving my skills in Italian. And while working as a receptionist at an international youth hostel, I often studied during the odd quiet moment when nobody was around.

Progress happens if you set aside the time to allow it to happen. Way too many of us waste endless hours watching TV, browsing Facebook and YouTube, shopping, drinking alcohol, and countless other activities. Think about all the moments throughout your day when time gets away from you. All those moments when you're simply waiting: waiting for an elevator, waiting in a shopping line, waiting for a friend to arrive, waiting for a bus or subway or any other type of public transportation. I always try to squeeze as much as I can out of these free moments. I whip out my smartphone and go through a few flash cards, or take a phrase book out of my pocket and review some essential basics. Or, if I'm feeling social and adventurous in a different country, I'll turn to the person behind me and try to strike up a quick conversation.

All of these little moments add up. They're hours of potential language learning or practice time. When you are dedicated to a language, there is not a single moment to waste.

For example, when I was learning Arabic, I activated an app on my phone that allowed me to use my camera to blend the view ahead of me into a flash-card app, so I could see where I was going while both studying *and* walking. (Of course, for most people, using audio studying tools while either walking or driving is more advisable.)

Make the time and change your priorities. Don't spread yourself thin. Focus on one major project and you will definitely have the time to do what it takes. Sure, being able to devote several months full-time to your project would be nice, but if that isn't possible, just devote as much time as you can and you will still reach the level you want to reach, even if the time it takes is longer.

Ultimately, it's not about the number of months or years, but the number of minutes every day you devote to this challenge. These minutes are what truly count.

4. Language Programs Are Expensive

Another huge misconception, especially in America, is that language learning is a privilege reserved for the rich. You have to pour money into expensive language learning courses, software, immersion programs, flights around the world, books, and private teachers—or you will fail miserably.

Not quite. I blame products like Rosetta Stone, which can cost several hundreds of dollars. I have tried Rosetta Stone myself, but I can't say it's superior to cheaper alternatives or free sources of information like online tools, blogs, or time with foreign friends. Spending more does *not* guarantee you'll succeed any more easily than someone who works with a much tighter budget. In fact, in a survey I ran on my blog, I found that spending money on several different products actually reduced your chances of success. You're far more likely to succeed if you pick just one basic product—like a phrase book, for instance—and set yourself to start speaking the language right away. Spending money, or hoarding language products, does nothing for your progress.

5. I'm Waiting for the Perfect Language Course

You can spend weeks or months saving up for a language learning course, but a course won't solve all your problems. In fact, it won't even solve most of them. Courses provide the content of a particular language but offer nothing concerning what you can actually do with that content.

To get started, I generally just grab a phrase book. This doesn't necessarily mean it's the best way for you, but my point is that even if a perfect course exists, it will still be only as good as the effort you put into using the language regularly.

After flipping through my phrase book, I go to my local bookstore and buy a course for between ten and twenty dollars, or visit a library to check one out for free. I generally find the Teach Yourself, Assimil, and Colloquial courses to be pretty good ones to start with, but there are also plenty of free online alternatives.

Does this mean that these are the perfect courses? No, but they are certainly quite good. They give me the general words and phrases I tend to use at the start in everyday conversations, while also missing others, such as vocabulary more specific to my situation—like that I studied engineering that I write on a blog.

No course will ever be perfect. With that in mind, go get an affordable book or sign up for a free online course, like on Duolingo.com, and remember to do lots of language work on the side—activities that will keep you in genuine interactions with human beings.

That's why, instead of study material or a particular immersion course, I prefer to focus on who I spend time with and how, conversing as often as possible in their language. A self-guided learning approach based on more structured study sessions works wonders.

6. The Wrong Learning Method Will Doom Me Before I Start

A lot of us feel that if we get off on the wrong foot, our early mistakes will sabotage an entire project. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's okay to have a bumpy start. The trick is to begin!

Even if you pick the wrong course, or you've tried one before and it didn't work out, that doesn't determine how things will go *this* time. And if you run into new challenges, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and try again. A little persistence pays off.

Any energy you put into researching the best possible way to begin would always be better spent on actually learning and using the language.

7. I Need to Study Before I Can Have a Conversation

You should start to speak a new language from day one. This may seem counterintuitive. Many of us feel we need to study first, until that glorious day when we are “ready” and have “enough” words to finally have a real conversation.

The truth is that day will never come. You can always justify, even when you have all but mastered a language, that you are not ready. There will always be more words to learn, more grammar to perfect, and more work to tweak your accent. You just have to accept that there will be a few communication problems and you will deal with them.

This requires embracing a little imperfection, especially during the early stages. Use the language now even though you may slip up a little. Being okay with this is the trick to using the language now rather than waiting many years.

8. I Can't Focus

My friend Scott Young wrote the exams for an entire MIT computer Science undergraduate program in one year, has a formal education in business, and studied psychology, nutrition, mathematics, physics, and economics. He is also a successful entrepreneur and enjoys life to the fullest. On top of this, he learned French in a short time, and the first time we met we spoke only in this language (even though he's from the English-speaking part of Canada). He has more recently had his very own projects to learn a language in three months, very similar to mine.

He clearly has quite a lot on his plate!

When I asked him about how on earth he keeps focused with all of these things going on, he told me that it's very simple: *focus on one major project at a time*. He stays committed to the primary project no matter what, even if distractions may tempt him to try to take on two or more interesting projects simultaneously.

Those with focus will make the various interests they have in life work sequentially rather than in parallel, so that they are not spreading themselves too thin. This way nothing gets neglected.

Focus is not an unusual trick, but it is a seldom-applied one. Scott gets so many things done by not attempting an overwhelming balancing act of divided interests. Instead, his method involves working patiently and systematically, adding each new skill to his life one at a time.

9. Some Languages Are Just Too Hard

It doesn't matter what language they're trying to learn—some people will always claim it's the hardest language in the world. I've heard it for every single language I've ever taken on, except Esperanto.

There is no “hardest” language. It's all biased opinions from proud natives who have no idea what it's like to learn that language as a second language, or from other learners who have learned it slowly and may feel their egos challenged if you try to learn it more quickly than they did. Discouragement is always for their benefit, not yours, and frankly, they have no idea what they are talking about.

When I publicly announced on my blog that I was going to learn Chinese, a lot of Westerners wh

had learned Chinese tried to discourage me (though never in person, and never did a native speaker do so). They went out of their way to repeat over and over again that all my previous experience was irrelevant because I was now learning the “hardest language in the world.”

What I found, though, was that most of them had almost exclusively learned only Chinese. They had little to no experience with other languages. Many of them said European languages like French and Spanish were very easy, even though many learners and native speakers with much more experience in these languages disagreed. Also, it turned out Chinese wasn't that bad after all, and I'll explain why in detail in chapter 6.

Nobody wins in this comparison game. If you aren't learning other languages, then forget them and focus on the one you're truly passionate about. Think about the many reasons you want to learn a language, and dismiss outright any unhelpful discouragement about its difficulty.

A good attitude will get you far, no matter what language you're learning.

10. Plateaus Are Inevitable

Plateaus themselves are not myths. The fact that we have to be stuck on them is.

You won't run into this problem as a beginner, but you may a little further down the road. Some of us have no problem getting into a new language, and we successfully reach a certain point of either basic communication or conversational fluency. But then we get stuck.

Why is that? If we successfully reached this stage, surely we found the perfect method for us, right?

Not quite. The point is not to search endlessly for the “perfect” method, but to find a good one and adjust it as you go. You reach a plateau because something in your current approach is not allowing you to progress.

If what you're doing isn't working, it isn't good enough and needs to be changed. One of my favorite definitions of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. So don't be afraid to mix things up. A change in how you think about a new language—or how often you speak it and with whom—will go a long way toward helping you avoid plateaus. Even if your previous approach did you well and got you to a particular stage, maybe a slightly new approach should be tried to catapult you to the next level.

11. Perfect Mastery Is Impossible

When people think that speaking a language means nothing less than being able to debate Kantian philosophy, with no accent or hesitations, then it can indeed feel like it would take decades to be able to say that you can actually speak a language. If you have this in mind, the entire project can feel hopeless. Why even bother starting if such an end goal is so impossible?

I don't know about you, but my English isn't perfect. I hesitate when I'm nervous, I forget precisely the right word every now and again, and there are plenty of topics I am uncomfortable talking about. Applying higher standards to your target language than you would to your native language is overkill.

Rest assured that fluency is very much possible for us mere mortals, even for those of us who do

poorly in languages in school. Aim for a conversational level (or lower) first and then strive for fluency. ~~Mastery can indeed come with time (even if perfection in *any* language is not possible), but~~ have short-term goals first.

12. Languages Are Boring

A huge misconception in language learning is that it's all about studying the entire time.

If what you're doing is boring, then stop what you're doing. This doesn't mean that learning a language is boring, just that the way you're trying to do it right now is. There are so many interesting ways to progress in your language that don't require doing something dull.

Try to expose yourself to some alternative content in the language—like through its music, cartoons, movies, magazines, jokes, many of which are available online—find a different language exchange partner, or follow any approach that tickles your fancy. There are infinite possibilities for learning a new language. With all these options available to you, staying bored is ridiculous. Do something different and you won't be bored as easily.

13. Native Speakers Won't Speak to Me

When I was first learning Spanish, I was really afraid that I would accidentally call someone's mother a smelly grasshopper (or worse) if I slipped up my pronunciation or conjugations. Because of this, I felt I had to wait until my Spanish was much better before I dared to use it in front of other people.

The problem with this is that you never feel ready enough. There will always be more to learn, so you will always be able to make an excuse that you should go off and learn more words before trying to speak to people. It's a vicious cycle that keeps many of us from opening our mouths for years.

And what actually happens when you do? People are incredibly encouraging, helpful, so happy to hear you try, patient, and understanding. This idea that we'll frustrate native speakers is not based on experience (or if it is, we are greatly exaggerating or misinterpreting what happened); it's based on the *assumption* they'll make fun of us or lose patience. This is our own fear manifesting itself; it's not based on reality.

At some point in your life I am sure someone learning English tried to speak to you. Did their pronunciation and their awkward, halting use of words insult you? Did you laugh out loud and call them a fool for trying? Or did you instead listen patiently and try to understand and communicate with them, and think that it's great that they speak more than one language? This last scenario is what will certainly happen when you try too. I guarantee, in almost every situation, you will be glad you tried to speak a language.

As for native speakers who simply reply back to us in English, it happens to the best of us. There are simple ways around this issue, though, which I discuss in detail in chapter 5. A bit more confidence and persistence will ensure that the conversation stays in the right language.

14. I'll Always Have an Accent

Way too much emphasis is put on speaking with no accent, as if being a spy is the ultimate point of your language project rather than communicating with other human beings. Having a little accent can be quite charming. Believe me, it doesn't hinder communication.

Even if you may always have an accent, this is no reason not to pour everything into this project so that you can be a genuinely fluent speaker. Speaking perfectly is impossible, because even native speakers make mistakes. And native speakers have interesting and varied accents too!

Accent reduction is possible, though, and something we'll discuss later.

15. My Friends and Family Won't Support Me

When I decided to get serious with my Spanish, after almost six months of speaking only English while in the country, I thought my friends would instantly support me. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case. Some of my Spanish friends, it turns out, had been using me to get free English practice. Some of my English-speaking friends fluent in Spanish didn't have the patience to help me and would only speak back to me in English rather than supporting my efforts to practice my Spanish.

Many of us will go through this difficulty. Our friends or family may not offer any support—language-related or moral—to help us with this huge challenge.

There is no simple one-size-fits-all solution to this problem. But the first thing you should do is tell your friends and family that you are passionate about learning a new language and you genuinely need their support. They might not appreciate how seriously dedicated you are to learning the language. They might have thought it was just a silly hobby. Showing them how serious you are might convince them to give you the support you need.

And if you still have trouble getting the support you need from those closest to you, remember there are huge communities of people online and in your city who will share in your passion for language learning—even native speakers themselves—so that you can always find support, even if it isn't from the friends you already have.

16. Everybody Speaks English

If you're a tourist hopping between five-star hotels or sticking to the well-beaten tourist trail in particular countries, you can indeed get by without learning the local language. Expensive restaurants provide an English translation of their menus, overpriced tour guides herd you along the same route as many millions of other foreigners have traveled, while talking excellent English, and when you board your flight home, at least one of the airline attendants will speak wonderful English to you, no matter where you are flying from.

This is incredibly limiting, though. The prominence of English prevents you from getting off the beaten track and chatting with people who don't cater to tourists.

While I was traveling through China, for instance, many of the staff at the hotels didn't speak English. An expression of concern always appeared on their faces as I, a white foreigner, approached them—until, of course, I started speaking Mandarin.

Even if you can get by in other countries speaking only English, you'll also miss out on a lot. Learning the local language opens up so many doors, from finding cheap local rates to hanging out

with people who have never had the chance to speak to foreigners. It allows you to see the true culture of a local place, rather than a cookie-cutter packaged version. And it's all thanks to *not speaking English*.

TALKING TRUMPS TECHNOLOGY

People often bring up automatic translation with me. On a few occasions, people have even suggested that they can shove their smartphones in someone's face to figure out what that person is saying. Presto! All communication problems will be solved.

While technology does advance at an incredible rate, I can definitely say that learning a new language will never, ever be replaced by technology. Even if in, say, fifty or a hundred years' time the technology is there to provide accurate subtitles on your iContactLenses as a person speaks, people will still want to interact with a human being through language. You can't live through translations. You have to deal with the language directly. So much of human communication is about context, reading complex body language, and understanding the subtle meaning of pauses and volume to gauge someone's feelings. This is incredibly hard to emulate with a computer.

17. I Can't Keep Up with Other People's Progress

There is a major problem in comparing ourselves to others—the others we think have it so easy on. Let us see what they decide to reveal about themselves. When they share their stories and fail to share details about any bumps they've encountered on their journeys, it can seem like they have it easy and are much smarter than we are, that we are puny in comparison to such immense giants.

Every successful language learner has had many challenges, failures, and frustrations along the road to fluency and beyond. If someone ever thinks *I* had it easy, I like to remind that person that I barely passed German in school, couldn't speak Spanish despite living there for six months, and could barely string together even the most basic sentences in Irish, even after ten years of schooling. Each language I've taken on has presented me with new challenges, and the same is true for every other successful language learner. We all face our own challenges.

Successful language learners continue on *despite* the challenges. That's the difference. When you come to a challenge, rather than thinking, *I might as well give up because that successful language learner didn't have to deal with this*, ask yourself, *What would that successful language learner do to get around this challenge if faced with it?* You may be surprised to find out that this person faced a very similar, if not the same, challenge at some point in the past. And even if he or she didn't, many other ultimately successful learners have.

18. Failure Begets Failure

If you've tried to learn a language before and failed, then you might have concluded you're bad at language learning. (I'm hoping the points I've made so far are emphasizing how untrue this is!) The much more logical conclusion is that you were learning the language in a way that was wrong for you.

There is no one true or perfect approach to language learning that is universally applicable to everyone. The traditional academic approach, which so many of us have passed through, simply does not work for many learners. Then again, there are those who have successfully learned with that approach. It's not that there are smart and dumb learners or universally good and bad learning systems, but there are systems that may work well for particular people and (many!) systems that may work poorly for others. The trick is to experiment and see what works for you. You may try something that doesn't produce results for you, and if that's the case, discard it and try something else.

Try a few of the suggestions in this book and see if they work for you. If they don't, that's okay. Experiment with alternative language learning techniques online, many of which I'll be discussing and providing links to in chapter summaries. From this, you can come up with your own ways to learn. The trick is to keep trying until you find a way that produces real results for you. It's never *you* who is broken, but your current approach. Fix the approach, discard what doesn't work, and you will be much more successful.

However, sometimes the issue isn't a general one with a one-size-fits-all solution, but a specific problem with the language you are learning. Should you learn an Arabic dialect or MSA? Where can you find good resources for learning the Irish language? Why does this language have to have masculine and feminine (or neuter and common, etc.) nouns? What's the deal with putting the letter *ñ* before every person's name or reference to them in certain Spanish sentences?

These kinds of specific language questions are challenges that may slow you down, but there are always answers. I cover a few points about individual languages in chapter 6, though I barely scratch the surface, but if you run into an issue with your language, just ask someone about it. Not all answers are covered in books; sometimes another person with experience in the language can give you a whole new perspective on that issue.

For instance, you can ask a question about pretty much any issue in the very active Fluent in 3 Months online forum (fi3m.com/forum), where I or another active language learner will give you some suggestions.

Otherwise, find a helpful native speaker and ask that person directly. Most questions do have an answer. Sometimes you can find that answer quickly enough in a book- or web-based language course, but you'll always get the best, most useful answer by asking a human being.

19. Once I Forget a Language, I Can't Relearn It

People who used to speak a different language when they were young but never fully picked it up often feel they let a golden opportunity slip through their fingers. But it's really just a case of rebooting their efforts and starting fresh with that language until they get it back.

One of my blog readers, Anna Fodor, shared her inspirational story with us. Born and raised in England, she grew up with a Czech mother and a Slovak father. So she should have grown up trilingual, right? Not quite. She spoke Czech up until the age of four and then stopped speaking it when she entered school. Her mother would speak to her in Czech and she'd reply in English, until her mother eventually stopped trying to communicate with her daughter in her native tongue.

Finally, when Anna went to university, she decided to reboot her efforts with Czech. She really enjoyed it, and it helped her realize all the aspects of Czech she *didn't* know. She had assumed the Czech part of her brain had been somehow locked away in her mind.

After graduation, she moved to Prague with the aim of learning to speak Czech. This was a pretty vague aim for her, but soon after arriving in Prague, she found my blog and my constant nudges for people to just *speak* the language, despite any mistakes. She had been looking for a magic solution to her problems for years, but now she needed to put in the work.

So one day she decided to stop overanalyzing things and just started speaking Czech with her mother. It was hard, and she was so scared that her mother would criticize her mistakes. But to her surprise, her mother exclaimed, “Wow, your Czech is almost perfect! This was really amazing. We’ve just had a real fluent conversation together!”

Anna’s Czech wasn’t quite “perfect,” but her mother’s words—in Czech—meant so much to her that she almost cried. It was like having a huge weight of childhood trauma lifted. She continued improving her Czech, but she’s learned that it’s never too late to get into a language, and she will strive for fluency, while being proud of the fact that she has already achieved her main goal of being able to truly converse with her mother.

20. Disabilities Make It Impossible to Learn a New Language

This is a rough one, because it can be frustrating when we have unfairly been dealt a real, medical, confirmed disadvantage as language learners.

When this issue comes up, I am reminded of Julie Ferguson’s story. Julie is severely deaf and partially blind. Despite this, incredibly, she has still managed to learn five languages as well as the basics of several others.

Her parents realized that she had a hearing problem when she was two years old. She had to go to speech therapy and had difficulty producing consonants like *s*, *h*, and *f*. Over the years, she has learned to get around her hearing difficulties by lipreading and extrapolating from what she *does* hear.

When her older brother—who has the same condition she does—started high school, she became aware of foreign languages and was really excited to get started on them herself. She turned up to her first French class with glee, but she finished it in a flood of tears. Her teacher didn’t know about her hearing problem, and the lesson had been given entirely as an oral one with no written cues. Since then, though, Julie has learned to always ask for new words to be written down for her.

Despite this bad start, Julie went on to study French for four years in high school plus one year at university. She also took three years of Spanish. She would shine at the written word in both languages, but listening was her sticking point.

Since her brother had gone down the same path, ahead of her, she found out that she could request both her French and Spanish listening examinations be done with a real person reading the script to her, which allowed her to lip-read as well as listen. Her teachers in school were otherwise very encouraging and supportive, and she ended up winning prizes for being the best French *and* Spanish student in her fourth year.

During university, she had the chance to study for a year in Sweden. She made sure that her teacher knew about her hearing problems from the start, and she was now much more confident about asking for things to be repeated or written down. She also grew more confident about using Swedish

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