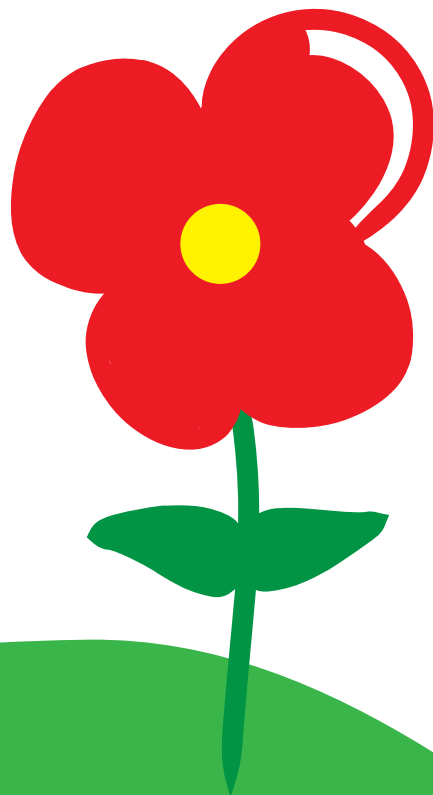


# Natural Language Learning

WITHOUT A TEACHER!



A step-by-step guide  
on how to learn a language  
naturally on your own!

By: David Snopek

# Natural Language Learning Without a Teacher!

David Snopek

May 3, 2012

# Dedications

Dedications To my wife, Carrie, for her continuous support of my crazy projects (learning Polish, building Bibliobird, writing an ebook, etc) – despite the fact that they require enormous amounts of both her and my time.

To my parents, Pat and Russ Snopek, for teaching my sister and me that we can do anything – and to my sister, Allison, for constantly demonstrating that they were right.

To my readers, viewers and fans on YouTube, Wykop and my blog for encouraging me to keep learning and creating.

Without *you*, none of this would ever have happened!

# Contents

<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Who is this ebook for? . . . . .	1
How can I quickly learn to speak English/Polish/etc fluently? . . . . .	2
How this ebook came to be . . . . .	2
The 3 steps to speaking any language <i>fluently</i> . . . . .	3
1. Get the language in your brain . . . . .	4
2. Overcome your fear of speaking . . . . .	5
3. Practice speaking . . . . .	5
What's in this ebook? . . . . .	6
<b>I Theory</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2 My story</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 My failures . . . . .	9
2.2 Finding motivation . . . . .	10
2.3 Learning Polish . . . . .	11

<b>3</b>	<b>Why this method works</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1	Why traditional methods fail . . . . .	14
3.2	Grammar mathematics – what you’re <i>not</i> doing! . . . . .	15
3.3	Language learning is more like learning karate . . . . .	16
3.4	How the brain learns languages . . . . .	17
3.5	The BIG problem . . . . .	18
3.6	The advantages of self-study . . . . .	19
<b>4</b>	<b>The three ingredients for successful language learning</b>	<b>21</b>
4.1	Time . . . . .	21
4.2	Motivation . . . . .	22
4.3	An effective method . . . . .	23
<b>5</b>	<b>The importance of listening</b>	<b>24</b>
5.1	Pronunciation . . . . .	24
5.2	The writing system isn’t the language! . . . . .	25
5.3	Listening is the <i>natural way</i> . . . . .	25
<b>6</b>	<b>What is grammar good for?</b>	<b>27</b>
6.1	Putting your mind at ease . . . . .	27
6.2	Helping you recognize patterns . . . . .	28
6.3	In writing . . . . .	28
6.4	Using language above your level . . . . .	29
<b>7</b>	<b>Vocabulary is the biggest challenge!</b>	<b>30</b>

7.1	How many words do I need to know? . . . . .	31
7.2	Vocabulary <i>is</i> learned consciously . . . . .	32
7.3	Vocabulary is best learned in context . . . . .	33
7.4	Forgetting is a natural part of remembering . . . . .	33
<b>II</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Using the theory in practice</b>	<b>36</b>
8.1	An overview of this part . . . . .	37
<b>9</b>	<b>The three parts of an effective method</b>	<b>38</b>
9.1	Interesting content . . . . .	38
9.2	Understand the content . . . . .	39
9.3	Review what you've learned . . . . .	40
<b>10</b>	<b>What is your goal?</b>	<b>41</b>
10.1	My goal with Polish . . . . .	43
10.2	Choosing your goal . . . . .	44
10.2.1	Pick your goal for now . . . . .	44
10.2.2	Start with your biggest priorities . . . . .	45
10.2.3	Be honest . . . . .	45
10.3	Complete the worksheet! . . . . .	46
<b>11</b>	<b>Planning your daily routine</b>	<b>47</b>
11.1	How to find the time . . . . .	48

11.2	How to schedule your time . . . . .	49
<b>12</b>	<b>Learning a language with Harry Potter</b>	<b>51</b>
12.1	Required materials . . . . .	52
12.2	My daily routine . . . . .	53
12.3	Step-by-step guide . . . . .	55
12.3.1	Step 1: Review your flashcards . . . . .	55
12.3.2	Step 2: Listen . . . . .	57
12.3.3	Step 3: Read and underline . . . . .	58
12.3.4	Step 4: Look up words and create flashcards . . . . .	58
12.3.5	Step 5: Optional activities . . . . .	60
12.4	Gauging your progress . . . . .	60
<b>13</b>	<b>Creating the perfect method for you!</b>	<b>63</b>
13.1	Finding the right content . . . . .	64
13.1.1	Books . . . . .	66
13.1.2	Music . . . . .	70
13.1.3	Movies and television . . . . .	71
13.1.4	Video games . . . . .	72
13.1.5	Podcasts . . . . .	73
13.1.6	Language Exchange . . . . .	74
13.1.7	Immersion . . . . .	75
13.1.8	Find something specific to the culture or language . . . . .	77
13.1.9	It might take a couple of tries! . . . . .	77

13.2	Understanding the content . . . . .	78
13.2.1	“Transcript” and a dictionary . . . . .	79
13.2.2	Full translation . . . . .	80
13.2.3	Context . . . . .	82
13.3	Review and repetition . . . . .	83
13.3.1	Review happens naturally . . . . .	83
13.3.2	Personal word lists and paper flashcards . . . . .	84
13.3.3	Spaced repetition systems . . . . .	85
13.3.4	Mnemonic devices . . . . .	87
13.4	Do I need to understand everything? . . . . .	88
13.4.1	Lots of small successes lead to big success . . . . .	89
13.4.2	The greatest danger . . . . .	90
13.5	Software solutions . . . . .	90
13.5.1	LingQ . . . . .	91
13.5.2	Bibliobird . . . . .	91
13.5.3	Partial solutions . . . . .	92
<b>A</b>	<b>Worksheets</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>Further reading</b>	<b>94</b>
B.1	Theoretical resources . . . . .	94
B.2	Language learning blogs . . . . .	95



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Who is this ebook for?

This ebook is for people...

- ... who have spent years in traditional courses but still can't order in a restaurant, watch a movie without subtitles, or have a casual conversation with a native speaker.
- ... who think that their course was too fast, too slow, or too boring.
- ... who think they don't have a talent for learning language. (But, in truth, no talent is necessary! What you need is a good approach!)
- ... who want to take control of their language learning journey and study using a method that will help them achieve their goal efficiently!

In short, this ebook is for *normal* people who want to learn a language. It's not for language experts or polyglots. It's for the majority of *us* who have tried in vain to

learn even one foreign language. Or for those who successfully learned one foreign language, but the process was so slow and painful they're looking for a better way to learn their second foreign language.

## **How can I quickly learn to speak English/Polish/etc fluently?**

This is the question I'm asked most frequently.

Usually I avoid answering it directly because (1) [I don't like the word \*fluently\*](#) ☺ and (2) it's a **BIG** question. So instead I usually ask what's causing the person to struggle with the language, and then focus on helping them solve their particular problem.

Now I've decided it's important to finally answer this question definitively in the introduction of this ebook, to clarify what is included in this ebook, as well as *what is not included*.

## **How this ebook came to be**

When I decided to write this ebook, I wanted to make something short, focused, and useful. I knew that if I wrote about everything, I would spend years trying to complete it.

So, I asked my readers to [complete a survey](#) asking them what they wanted the ebook to be about. I gave them four possible ideas and a few free text fields. These were the four ideas:

1. A step-by-step guide on how to learn a language naturally on your own.

2. An extended guide to getting over your [fear of speaking](#).
3. Advice, tips and tricks for practicing speaking (for language learners who have already achieved a high level and no longer have a fear of speaking, but who still have trouble speaking).
4. All the language learning advice already on my blog (over 125 articles at that time) reorganized into an easy-to-read format.

Honestly, I was hoping that my readers would chose number #4 because I thought it would be easiest to write. 😊

Here are the full results:

---

<b>#1</b> <i>Step-by-step guide to natural language learning</i>	<b>38%</b>
<b>#4</b> <i>All my blog articles re-organized</i>	<b>27%</b>
<b>#2</b> <i>Extended guide to overcoming your fear of speaking</i>	<b>21%</b>
<b>#3</b> <i>Tips and tricks for practicing speaking</i>	<b>14%</b>

---

At first I was disappointed that my favorite idea didn't win. 😊 But the more I thought about it, I realized my readers actually chose a much better topic ... **because choices #1, #2 and #3 were not arbitrary! They're the three steps to learning a language.**

## **The 3 steps to speaking any language *fluently***

This is my answer to the question I gave above: “*How can I quickly learn to speak English/Polish/etc fluently?*”

No matter how you learn a foreign language, if you went from zero to speaking at a high level of proficiency, you will have passed through these three steps. The steps don't need to happen one after the other – they can be done simultaneously. However, when I was learning Polish, I did them *practically* in order.

## 1. Get the language in your brain

How can you speak a language if you don't know any words or if you can't understand someone when they speak it? **Well, you can't!** ☺

First, you need to somehow get the language in your brain. Personally, I did this by reading and listening to Harry Potter. But there are many other ways to get a language in your brain, like:

- Taking a traditional course
- Living in another country
- Using the “[shadowing](#)” method
- Watching movies
- Listening to music
- ... and many more!

Some of these methods are more effective than others, but if you use any of them long enough, you will eventually get the language in your brain.

If you're doing these in order, at the “end” of this step (there is never really any end to learning a language!) you will be able to understand anything and form sentences in your head without translating (but not necessarily during a real conversation).

## 2. Overcome your fear of speaking

One of the most common problems I hear from people learning languages is that they can understand a great deal and they know tons of words – but when they're actually speaking with someone they get really nervous and their mind goes blank. But immediately after the conversation, when the stress is gone, they have no problem coming up with the words they wanted to say.

**Not all people have a fear of speaking – *but most do!***

Many people are afraid of making mistakes when speaking. They're afraid the other person won't understand them – or even that the other person might laugh at them or think they're stupid.

This is a very serious problem and [I've written at least one article](#) about how to overcome it. In the future, I plan to write many more!

## 3. Practice speaking

Once that language is in your brain and you are no longer afraid to use it, you need to speak as much as possible!

At this point you develop and practice “speaking strategies” like [circumlocution](#) (for when you don't know a word), various conversational phrases to keep things flowing, and even non-verbal tricks to make people more comfortable when speaking with you.

This practice will allow you to respond quickly and naturally, without slowing down the conversation.

# What's in this ebook?

**The goal of this ebook is to help you complete step 1 of the 3 steps.**

I think this is great because it's probably the most important and the most *misunderstood* step. Few people know the true mechanisms by which the brain learns languages – and even when they do, it can be difficult to decide how to use them in practice.

For this reason, the ebook is broken into two parts:

- A theory part, where I explain why this method works, and ...
- A practical part, where I give you a step-by-step guide to developing your own method based on these ideas.

Unfortunately, this also means that steps 2 and 3 aren't discussed in this ebook. However, there are a few articles and videos on these topics on my blog (linked above) and I plan to write more. Or maybe someday I'll write two more ebooks.

😊

**Thanks for taking the time to read this ebook! I hope it's helpful on your language learning journey.**

*Best of luck!*

-David Snopek

**Part I**

**Theory**

# Chapter 2

## My story

I've been writing and recording videos about language learning, Polish and American culture for more than three years. If you've been following [Linguatrek](#), my blog, you probably already know my whole story! But if you don't know me, here's a quick *official* bio:

David Snopek is an American entrepreneur, programmer, language teacher, and language learner born and raised in Milwaukee, WI, USA. Though his last name is, in fact, Polish (due to distant Polish ancestors who immigrated to the USA about 100 years ago), he grew up speaking only one language: English.

As an adult, David was able to achieve a rather high level of proficiency in Polish using a non-traditional method. Inspired by his success in language learning, he created [Linguatrek](#) to share the experience with others, and [Bibliobird](#), a web application to help Poles learn English.

*Unofficially*, language learning is [my true passion](#) and writing this ebook is another way to share my passion with others!





**Figure 2.1:** *Photo of me!*

In this ebook, I want to show you how to learn another language in an enjoyable, fast and effective way. There isn't only one right method for learning a language. Some methods will be **more efficient** than others. But the best method for you depends a lot on YOU, and your personal preferences.

**I want to help you find *your method*.**

**Why?**

*Because I've been there!* I once needed the same type of help and advice.

## **2.1 My failures**

***The truth is that I failed to learn several languages before I ultimately succeeded in learning Polish.***

Like many Americans, I studied Spanish in grade school and high school. For a total of six years, I played games, sang songs, learned a ton of grammar, and took some tests. I did everything the teacher said and actually got very good scores. But like most of my peers, I failed to learn how to do more than pass a grammar test.

*After SIX years!*

I talk to people *every day* who had the same experience with Spanish or English or French or whatever they were learning. They studied in school for 5 or 10 or 15 years, but they still can't order in a restaurant or watch a movie without subtitles or have a casual conversation with a native speaker.

At that point, I decided that I have no talent for languages and therefore I am incapable of learning one. And besides what's the point? Why even learn Spanish anyway? At the time I had no idea and no real motivation to keep trying.

## **2.2 Finding motivation**

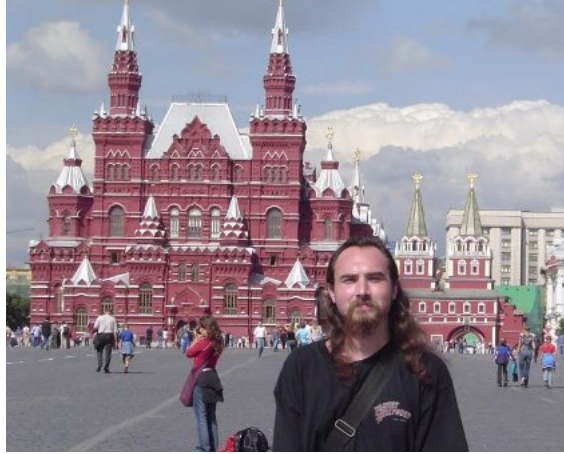
Later, as an adult, I made several Russian-speaking friends. One of them invited me to go with him to visit his family in Belarus and Russia. I thought, "*Wow, what an amazing opportunity! I'll be able to see and experience life from the perspective of the residents of these countries. I'd better learn some Russian!*"

So I signed up for a Russian language course at the local university. I enjoyed the course, but much like my Spanish course, we learned grammar, grammar and *more grammar*.

After a year, I went to Russia with my friend and it was really fantastic! My language ability was *terrible*. However, the experience was enough for me to catch the language learning and traveling bug. When we came back, I continued taking Russian courses for the next two years.

***Unfortunately, I never got very good and I was getting increasingly frustrated.***

I put tons and tons of work into studying Russian. But whenever I had the opportunity to test my language abilities with my Russian-speaking friends, I found



**Figure 2.2:** *In Red Square. Yes, I used to have long hair. ☺*

that I could only have the most basic of conversations, and only if they spoke very slowly and restricted themselves to the small amount of vocabulary I knew.

**Six years of Spanish and three years of Russian and I'd only mastered grammar tests.** *Fluidly* speaking and understanding a language was still little more than a dream.

## 2.3 Learning Polish

When it came time to learn Polish, I started by taking another college-level course. I enjoyed it quite a bit, mostly due to the professor, who told great stories. But, after a year it was obvious I that wasn't going to really learn Polish, just like I never really learned Spanish or Russian.

I asked myself, "*Do I want to learn how to pass grammar tests? Or do I want to actually speak Polish?*" Obviously, I wanted to speak Polish!

**It was time for a drastic change.**

So I stopped going to my Polish class and started doing a ton of research on how the human brain learns languages. I also began experimenting with a method

that involved [reading and listening to Harry Potter](#) in Polish.

At first it went very slowly. It took me four months to read the first book. But only a year after starting, I managed to read all seven Harry Potter books! **I went from struggling with the most basic conversations to being able to:**

- Talk with native speakers on almost any topic
- Read and listen to books
- Watch movies
- Write emails, letters and articles

Plus, I did it relatively quickly, studying primarily on my own (not in a course and without a teacher), and while living here in the USA. It was a profoundly enjoyable and [life-changing experience](#).



**Figure 2.3:** *My wife and I in Warsaw*

Only a year and a half after starting this new method, my wife (Carrie) and I moved to Poland for a year. *Immediately*, I was able to:

- Handle Polish bureaucracy entirely in Polish, including the immigration office, the tax office, the post office, etc.

- [Interview for jobs](#) in Polish
- Find and rent an [apartment](#)

***You can do it too!*** I don't have a *talent* for learning languages. If I did, I would have easily learned Spanish and Russian by now. When I learned Polish, I was still the same talentless person I was before. **The only thing that changed was my approach.**

# Chapter 3

## Why this method works

### 3.1 Why traditional methods fail

To understand why this method works, let me first explain why traditional, classroom-type methods *don't* work.

Traditional methods focus on consciously memorizing grammar rules. You must understand the rules, explain the rules, and then take tests to prove you know the rules. If you're a good student, you can usually learn them and do well in the course.

Language learning is taught a lot like calculus. Calculus is a great example of a *conscious* skill: a lot of background information is required to understand what you are doing and why. A complex set of steps must be performed to compute a derivative, for example. You must understand each step, then remember and execute each step properly. It is a logical task that is performed *consciously*.

That's the problem: in school, languages are taught like mathematics, but with letters and words instead of numbers. **But learning a language is NOT like learning math!** Language learning uses entirely different brain functions and requires

completely different processes to learn.

## 3.2 Grammar mathematics – what you’re *not* doing!

When you speak your native language, you think a thought then simply open your mouth and speak. When you listen to someone speaking, you don’t dissect it grammatically. The meaning simply appears in your head – *completely unconsciously*. You don’t do any grammar mathematics.

Consider the grammar rules required to make this thought – book (blue), person (female), to read (now) – into an English sentence:

The person is doing the reading, so they’re the subject and in English subjects go first. The female 3rd person singular pronoun is “she,” so we start with:

> **She**

Ok! Now, English is **SVO**, so the verb comes next: “to read.” Used with a person, we drop the “to” and, oh yeah, it’s 3rd person singular, so we add an -s:

> **She reads**

The object is “book.” In English, adjectives come before the nouns they describe. So it’s:

> **She reads blue book.**

Right! Wait, no...

It's happening right now, which is a different tense: present continuous. The formula for that is: be + present participle. The 3rd person singular form of "be" is "is" and the present participle of "to read" is "reading."

> **She is reading blue book.**

Awesome! Done...

Not correct you say? Let me get out the 20-page list of rules about the use of articles and decide to use one of those:

> **She is reading a blue book.**

And now speak!

*To native speakers of English:* Do you ever do that kind of thinking when you speak English? Nope! So, why do you expect to do it when speaking a foreign language? There simply isn't enough time to do all of this while speaking, listening or reading.

### **3.3 Language learning is more like learning karate**

**Truly speaking and understanding a language isn't a conscious activity!** In fact, learning a language has more in common with *learning karate* than studying mathematics: you watch the instructor's movements, and, over time and with practice, you will be able to mimic the instructor more and more precisely.

It's not because you *logically understand* the movements better (although, you probably do!), but rather, it's because your brain is naturally designed to learn



physical movements by doing them. It is an unconscious process that happens *automatically!*

The human brain is also naturally designed to learn languages! By simply communicating in the language in some way, your brain will slowly (and *automatically!*) develop an ability in that language.

If you memorize every detail of what the instructor does or pass a written test on it, you wouldn't be any better at karate. In the same way, **no amount of conscious knowledge about grammar will allow you to speak a language!** (But some conscious knowledge of grammar can be helpful, like we discuss in [Chapter 6](#)).

Once you've practiced karate for a while, you can simply decide to perform a particular technique and your body will comply – completely unconsciously! Just as you will eventually be able to speak or understand a language.

### 3.4 How the brain learns languages

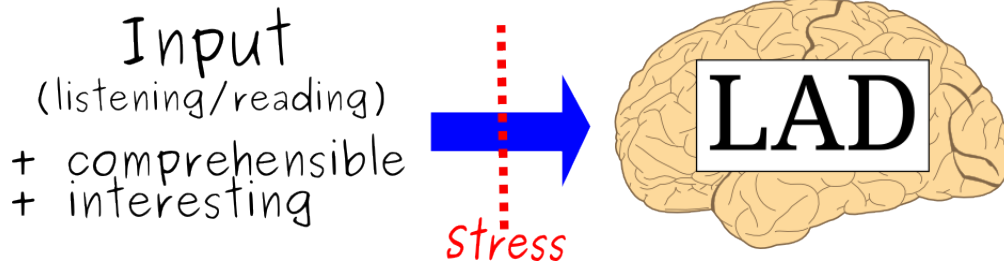
Linguists talk about a *Language Acquisition Device* (LAD) that exists in all of our minds. If you can activate this *device*, your brain will start to learn the language naturally and unconsciously.

So, the question is: **How do you activate it?** It's actually very simple!

***According to linguists, you activate your Language Acquisition Device (LAD) by listening to (or reading) content in the language that you can understand.***

Linguists call this *comprehensible input*.

It works more efficiently if:



**Figure 3.1:** *The language learning formula*

1. You are interested in the input, and
2. You are in a low-stress environment.

Everyone learns languages this way, whether they realize it or not. Even someone who successfully learned a language in a traditional course! It isn't the memorization of grammar rules that led to their success – it's the comprehensible input.

The main problem with traditional courses is that 90% of the time is spent on activities that don't activate your LAD (like practicing grammar and taking tests). Traditional courses also tend to focus on mistakes and correction – which leads to greater stress. And, of course, the learning materials tend to be very boring and artificial. That's why they usually work very slowly or not at all!

## 3.5 The BIG problem

Even though the formula is very simple, there is one big problem: **How can you understand input in a language that you don't speak yet?**

This is where having a method is helpful!

Of course, there isn't only one correct language learning method – the best method for you depends a lot on you and your personal preferences. An effective method is made up of a few parts:

- A source of interesting content in the language
- A method to understand this content
- A system to review and remember what you've learned

In [Chapter 13](#) we'll work on constructing a method based on this framework that is customized to your interests, needs and personal preferences!

## 3.6 The advantages of self-study

A real-world course with a teacher can be nice for a few reasons:

- You have an expert (the teacher) to consult with
- All of the lessons are planned for you
- You can interact with other people socially

However, I think those advantages are greatly outweighed by the disadvantages:

- You move at the pace of the rest of the class, which could be too fast or too slow
- You have to learn what the teacher plans, which could be boring or might not apply to your goals
- You have to travel to a specific place at a specific time, which might conflict with other commitments
- You aren't actively learning 100% of the time (ex. when another student is answering a question)

- Depending on the teacher and the other students, it can be stressful
- It's generally more expensive than self-study

In short, you can accomplish more, faster, and more conveniently with self-study. And if you need to consult an expert, there are lots of internet communities where you can ask for help (or socialize!) – like [Bibliobird!](#)

## Chapter 4

# The three ingredients for successful language learning

For a long time, I've been saying [the three ingredients for successful language learning](#) are: **time**, **motivation** and an **effective method**.

In the previous chapter, we discussed what makes up an effective method. But time and motivation should not be ignored! In fact, I think they are even *more important* than an effective method!

### 4.1 Time

By “time” I mean two things:

- **You need to spend time with the language regularly.** Even if you only spend 15 minutes a day, practicing a little each and every day is better than spending a lot of time only once a week.
- **You need perseverance!** Humans are designed to learn languages. *The only*

*way to fail is to give up.* If you stick with it, you *will* learn the language – no doubt about it!

As we discussed above, language learning is a lot like athletic training. You could say the same two things about exercise and getting in shape: exercising 15 minutes a day (almost 2 hours per week) is better than working out 3 hours every Saturday. Plus, you need to stick with your exercise routine to see results!

## 4.2 Motivation

Because you need to convince yourself to do it regularly and not give up, you need strong, internal motivation!

External motivation, like getting a good grade or finding a new job, can get you started – but it probably won't be enough to keep you going. For that reason, it's important to make the task itself enjoyable. You don't need to suffer to make progress! We are naturally motivated to do things we like.

As I mentioned earlier, I learned Polish primarily from reading and listening to books. I love reading books, even in my native language! Once I get involved in a story, I am naturally compelled to find out what happens next. I have no problem getting myself to read daily.

Other types of deeper motivation can also help, such as planning a trip to the country where the language is spoken, meeting friends who are native speakers, or getting in touch with your roots.

Besides just helping you persevere, the latest research on learning shows that being highly engaged and motivated actually improves the natural learning process.

## 4.3 An effective method

Any language learning method will work ... *eventually*.

But some methods are more effective than others. When you use a less effective method, you'll end up spending more time working towards your goals. In the previous chapter we discussed many of the things that make a method effective. We'll continue to discuss this throughout the rest of this ebook.

Unsurprisingly, as long as your method is reasonably effective, the most important thing is to simply choose a method you enjoy!

## Chapter 5

# The importance of listening

I receive many questions from people looking for advice on how to use the method I used to learn Polish in their own language studies. The main misconception is that reading (with your eyes) is enough. This is partly my fault, because I often consider listening to a book or text to also be “reading.” So in the past, I used that word to describe both activities.

But *listening* is not just as important as *reading* – **listening is even more important!** If possible (especially when beginning to learn a language) **you should spend *significantly more time listening than reading.***

### 5.1 Pronunciation

One of the most common questions I get looks something like this:

I’m reading this book in English and it’s going well. But I’m worried that I’ll pronounce the words I’m learning incorrectly. What should I do?



This is a very real risk, but the answer is obvious: you shouldn't only be reading – you should be listening too!

This is especially important when you first start learning. Once you've reached an advanced level, it's much less important. By that point you will have developed a pretty good sense for how to pronounce words from their spelling. At least as good as the average native speaker, that is. For languages where the spelling isn't very strongly bound to the pronunciation (for example, English), even native speakers will struggle with some words.

## 5.2 The writing system isn't the language!

Some languages have multiple writing systems. For example, Japanese has three: Kanji, Hiragana and Katakana. There is even a fourth script, Romaji, which is largely used by students learning Japanese. Many words in Japanese can be written in all four scripts. But if you take away the writing system, Japanese is still the same language.

Language has existed long before any writing system. (And some still don't have one!)

A language is both more and less than its writing system. If you find yourself completely dependent on the written word, you don't really know the language.

## 5.3 Listening is the *natural way*

You learned your first language by listening. I personally didn't start learning to read until I was 6 years old and in 1st grade, at which point I already spoke fluid English. Children continue learning to read [until around age 10](#).

I know that [learning styles](#) are very popular in education. Some people identify themselves as primarily [visual](#), [auditory](#) or [tactile learners](#).

However, language *is* auditory! Our brains are designed to naturally learn languages the way we did with our first language: by listening. Even if you consider yourself a visual learner and enjoy listening less than reading – **your brain still needs to listen in order to fully learn a language!**

*(Note: Of course, this statement doesn't apply to sign language, which is visual by nature. But the same logic applies: to learn a sign language you must actually watch someone sign – not just look at pictures of signs in a book.)*

## Chapter 6

# What *is* grammar good for?

Even after you consciously learn all the rules, you won't be able to use them correctly. It will take time and exposure to the language to really use them unconsciously. So, why waste years learning the rules first?

It can seriously hurt your motivation to spend a lot of time and energy learning the grammar, only to find out afterward that you still can't speak or understand much!

However, once your unconscious ability has started to develop, it *can* be helpful to know the grammar rules. And at this point, they will be much easier to understand because you have experience with the language – they may even be *interesting!*

**So, what *is* grammar good for?**

### 6.1 Putting your mind at ease

As adults, it's very hard to accept things without questioning. We need to know why! For example, why do we say in Polish, “*lubię **filmy***” (*I like movies*) but

“interesuję się **filmami**” (*I’m interested in movies*)?

Honestly, you don’t need to know *why*. With this word you say it like this and with another you say it like that. Just accept it! That’s what children do when they learn a language. But adults have problems with this. Sometimes they need an answer and the grammar rules can provide one.

**So read them when it bothers you, get your piece of mind and then  
MOVE ON!**

## 6.2 Helping you recognize patterns

Languages are made up of patterns. Recognizing those patterns is an important part of learning the language. If you don’t know anything about the language’s grammar, it will be hard to know what to pay attention to. You don’t need to memorize any rules or take any tests, but just a quick overview of the grammar (like [I made for Polish](#)) can be very helpful.

As you learn the language better, occasionally take a look in a grammar book. It might help you recognize a pattern you’ve seen for a while but didn’t quite pick up!

## 6.3 In writing

Grammar rules are very difficult to apply when speaking or listening to fluid speech. It happens too fast for conscious thought! But when you are writing, you have plenty of time to think.

Knowing the grammar rules can help you correct mistakes in your writing, which will make you seem smarter and more educated.

## 6.4 Using language above your level

Features of a given language are always naturally learned in a predictable order (called the [order of acquisition](#)). For example, English-speaking children always learn to use the present progressing tense (*-ing* verbs) correctly before learning the plural forms of nouns.

If you haven't learned a particular language feature naturally yet, you can use the grammar rules to fake it! This is very difficult to do in fluid speech, so you might not be able to skip ten steps further ahead than your unconscious language skill level, but you might be able to skip ahead one or two.

I do this in Polish with the conditional tense (for example, “Zrobiłbym to” – *I would do it*). I still haven't acquired it naturally and can't use it or understand it without thinking. But most of the time I can sort of fake it. 😊

## Chapter 7

# Vocabulary is the biggest challenge!

All facets of language learning are important, including: reading, listening, speaking, grammar, pronunciation, etc. **But vocabulary is the most important!**

Perfect grammar can't help you understand or speak if you don't know the words. On the other hand, if you get the grammar wrong but use the right words, you will probably still be understood.

**Vocabulary is also the biggest challenge.** There are only so many parts to a language's grammar. You will be reviewing that same grammar over and over again, slowly strengthening your understanding of them the entire time you are learning a language.

**But the amount of vocabulary in a language is essentially *infinite*** – new words are coined every year.

## 7.1 How many words do I need to know?

It is often quoted that the 2,000 most common words in the English language make up 96% of the vocabulary in the average spoken conversation (Schonell, et al. 1956; via the [Wikipedia](#)). Some learners take this to mean that they only need to learn 2,000 words! But this is extremely deceptive. All the meaning is in that last 4%.

If you take a look at these [lists of common words](#), you'll see they're largely grammar or "connector" words like: a, the, in, on, at, with, who, what, where, etc. Later in the list you'll start to hit basic vocabulary like the colors, "boy," "girl," etc.

But you can't have a real conversation with *only* the 2,000 most common words because in a real conversation you're talking *about something!* And the topic you're talking about (ex. the weather, music, food, your job, etc) probably has a hundred words specific to that subject. In any conversation, maybe only a dozen of these specialized words will appear, but the other person could say *any* of them!

The 2,000 most common words can be a good starting point, but in order to understand or speak about all the same topics that you do in your native language, you will need to know **a lot** more words!

There is no magic number for how much vocabulary you need. You have to simply learn as much as possible, focusing on the vocabulary that is important to your goals with the language.

[Here](#) is a great article which addresses all sides of this. The article states that Webster's 3rd edition has around 54,000 words and the average native speaker of English knows around 20,000 words. It also lists several studies that show you need to know at least 95% of the words in a written text to understand it (without the help of a dictionary).

With written language, you need many more words to reach 95%:

Vocabulary Size	Written Text Coverage
1000 words	72.0%
2000	79.7%
3000	84.0%
4000	86.8%
5000	88.7%
6000	89.9%
15,851	97.8%

**Table 7.1:** Francis and Kucera. 1982; via the [Wikipedia](#).

When I read the Harry Potter books in Polish, I had to learn *thousands* of new words before I could read comfortably without a dictionary. Even though it might *seem* unlikely, almost all of these words came in handy later when speaking with Polish people.

## 7.2 Vocabulary is learned consciously

I just spent the previous six chapters of this ebook trying to convince you that grammar is learned unconsciously. Well, vocabulary *actually is* learned consciously.

The fact that we can forget words in our native language attests to this. And memorizing new words from lists in our native language – although not the most enjoyable or effective method – actually does succeed in teaching us new vocabulary!



## 7.3 Vocabulary is best learned in context

There are lots of ways to learn vocabulary: flashcards, word lists, computer programs (ex. Rosetta Stone). But in your native language, you learned almost all the vocabulary you know from context. That is, from encountering the words while reading or listening to others.

### **Why should we learn differently when studying a foreign language?**

Learning a new word in context gives you additional clues to help remember it. You can associate it with the situation you were in or the emotion you felt when you learned it. This is particularly effective when:

- **You learn a word from a song.** Songs tend to stick in our minds better than any other type of language.
- **You learn a word in an embarrassing situation.** I've used quite a few words incorrectly when speaking with Poles and a few situations were quite embarrassing! But I will never forget what I learned in those situations. 😊

## 7.4 Forgetting is a natural part of remembering

Many learners become disappointed when they learn a word one day, only to forget it the next day. In fact, for some people this is extremely demotivating! They might even believe that because of this, they'll never be able to learn a language!

**But forgetting, is a natural part of learning a word!**

In my experience, I rarely remember a word the first time I learn it. I usually forget it and relearn it multiple times before I truly remember it. Because of this, vocabulary study has the most to gain from a systematic approach to review. There are even computer programs called *spaced repetition systems*, like [Anki](#) or [Super-Memo](#) which acknowledge this fact. We'll discuss them in more detail in [Section 13.3](#).

But I don't think flashcard systems are a complete replacement for learning words in context. I usually need to encounter a word in a real context 2-3 times before I really start to remember it, but the flashcards often help me keep the words *fresh* in my mind until I encounter them again.

# **Part II**

# **Practice**

# Chapter 8

## Using the theory in practice

In the previous part we learned a lot about the theory of how the brain learns languages. But it can be very challenging to apply these principles in practice!

Around the end of 2007, I personally faced exactly this challenge. I had just learned all this theory, but I had no idea how to begin – or if any of this would even work! Through trial and error over the following year, I discovered a method that worked for me.

My hope is that this ebook will save you all that guessing time by providing a step-by-step guide for developing your own method. You don't need to make all the mistakes I made, or wonder if it'll be successful, because I've already been there and found a framework that works.

That said – a lot depends on you and your learning style, interests and preferences. I *will* tell you exactly what I did, if you want to simply copy me. But I will also provide *you* with the tools to create your own method modeled inside this framework.

**Remember: The most effective method for you will be *unique* to you!**

## 8.1 An overview of this part

- In [Chapter 9](#), I will give an overview of the 3 parts that make up any method modeled inside this framework.
- In [Chapter 10](#), we will discuss the importance of goal setting and discover what your goal is.
- In [Chapter 11](#), we will discuss the importance of a daily routine and how to plan yours.
- In [Chapter 12](#), I will tell you *exactly* how to do the method that I personally used when I was reading the Harry Potter books in Polish.
- In [Chapter 13](#), we will discuss the 3 parts of the framework in detail and talk about different ways to do each of them, so you can develop your own method.

There will be a number of [printable worksheets](#) to help you plan your new method. So, when you are done with this part, you will have a very concrete idea of what to do next!

## Chapter 9

# The three parts of an effective method

Any effective language learning method will have three parts:

- A source of interesting content in the language.
- A method to understand this content.
- A system to review and remember what you've learned.

### 9.1 Interesting content

This can be just about anything: books, movies, newspaper articles, podcasts, television shows, video games, conversation, music, etc. Whichever content you choose should adhere to the following guidelines:

- **It should be interesting and enjoyable to you.** I usually tell people to

choose something they love to do in their native language, and, instead, to do it in the language they are learning.

- **You should experience as little stress as possible.** Some people love talking and just can't be stopped – for others it's extremely stressful. But stress impedes your ability to think, so don't force yourself to do something too uncomfortable!
- **It should be at the right level for your ability and motivation.** The best content is just a little above your ability. But if you're *really* motivated (like if the content is extremely interesting!) you can tackle content that is much harder.
- **It must have an audio component.** Some people are better visual learners and some people are better audio learners – but the LAD always needs some audio in order to do its work.

We'll discuss these points in more detail and talk about how to find content that meets this criteria in [Section 13.1](#).

## 9.2 Understand the content

In order to activate your LAD, you must understand the content that you've chosen. The challenge is: **How to understand content in a language you don't speak yet?**

There is a wide variety of systems available to accomplish this. They range from the very direct and meticulous (i.e. looking up unknown words in the dictionary), to the very holistic and loose (i.e. guess from context).

In [Section 13.2](#), we'll look at several different methods and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each.

## 9.3 Review what you've learned

Review and repetition are very important in language learning. Many people become frustrated when they study, for example, ten words and the next day only remember two. But forgetting is a very important part of the learning process! You will likely forget everything and have to relearn it several times before it ultimately sticks. *This is normal and necessary!*

Like all things in language learning, review works best when done regularly. So, it helps to have a system to review and repeat things you've already learned - primarily vocabulary, which is learned consciously.

There are many systems to review and we'll discuss a few of them in detail in [Section 13.3](#).



# Chapter 10

## What is your goal?

Before we get into the details of any specific method, I want to stop and talk about a very important topic: *goal setting*.

The method you ultimately create will depend a lot on what your goal is with the language you seek to learn. Many people skip this step and embark on a method that is completely unaligned with their goals. This leads to two common outcomes: (a) they waste a lot of time on things that don't matter, or (b) they do something too boring or hard and inevitably give up.

Another assumption (also made by language teachers and gurus) is that everyone has the same goal as they do! When you're reading someone's language learning advice, try to find out what their language learning goal is. Because if it's not the same as yours – their advice might not apply to you at all.

Here is an example: Some people have the goal to speak without an accent. They want native speakers to be unable to distinguish them (by their accent, at least) from other native speakers. *This is a valid goal!* But it's not everyone's goal. (In fact, it's not my goal with Polish.)

A person who believes that this is important will likely tell you to start with

listening and pronunciation practice before you seriously begin to learn the language. They will likely have a dozen techniques to practice pronunciation and clever tricks to ensure that you're doing it right.

Here's a few that I've heard:

- To practice the /th/ sound in English: place your finger in front of your mouth (as if you're telling someone to be quiet) and if your tongue touches your finger when you say /th/, you're doing it correctly. (I first heard about this from [ImTalkingJBrooch](#) on YouTube.)
- To practice the Polish /p/ or /b/ sound, which lacks the burst of air that accompanies it in English: place a lit candle 6 inches in front of your mouth and if the flame doesn't move when saying words that start with /p/ or /b/, you're doing it correctly.

These techniques are very useful and there is probably a technique for every sound difference in every language! But the number of these techniques you do, when you start doing them, and how much time you spend on them – all depends on your goal.

Since speaking without an accent isn't my goal, I would probably get bored and stop trying if I spent too much time on pronunciation practice. But I *know* that this isn't my goal, so I don't force myself to do too many of them. If I start reading someone's advice and they say I need to start learning a language by practicing pronunciation *only* for the first six weeks – I ignore them!

**This even applies to my advice!** ☺ But in this ebook, I'm going to do my best to make it about YOU – not me. Where I can, I'll tell you when something has to do with *my* personal preference and give a couple of other options that might better suit you.

## 10.1 My goal with Polish

Before you start picking your own goal, it might be helpful to hear about my goal with Polish and what it means for my language learning method. It will also help you understand where I'm coming from. Here it is:

I want to be able to understand, speak and write *comfortably* on all the same topics that I enjoy in my native language.

Short, huh? It's worth nothing all the things that are **not** part of my goal:

- **I don't want to be able to speak without any errors.** Of course, I want to speak with **fewer** errors, but if people understand what I mean, I'm satisfied!
- **I don't want to speak without an accent.** If my accent is good enough that people **always** understand me, that's enough!
- **I don't need to know every word, just enough to be comfortable.** Even in topics I care about, I don't need to know everything – I just need to be able to comfortably navigate situations when I don't know something.
- **I'm not worried about formality or informality.** Some people need to learn formal, business English or, on the other end of the spectrum, want to speak very casually with slang and vulgarity.
- **I'm not worried about topics I don't enjoy in my native language.** I could spend time learning the vocabulary for golf, taxes or farming – but I won't!



These factors are most important when it comes to selecting the content that you'll use in your method.

For example, using fantasy and science fiction novels as my primary content works **great** for me. But if you wanted to learn formal, business English - business books, videos of shareholder meetings, formal emails and letters, etc would be better content.

Or, if you wanted to learn more popular, everyday language with slang and vulgarities, focusing on movies, television, music, online chat rooms, language exchange, etc makes much more sense.

**Everything in *your* method should stem directly from your ultimate goal with the language.**

## 10.2 Choosing your goal

Now, let's work on choosing your goal! I've created a printable [Goal Worksheet](#) with questions to ask yourself to help you articulate your goal.

**Stop reading now and print out the worksheet!** The sooner you decide on your goal, the easier it is going to be to create your method. But before you get started, here are a few final notes to guide you...

### 10.2.1 Pick your goal for now

Don't stress out about picking the perfect goal. Over time your goal is likely to change – that's normal! Also, don't make your goal: "Speak, understand, read and write language X perfectly."

Perfect is boring, vague and difficult to get excited about. Instead, pick a goal that really motivates you *right now*! It should be something that you are absolutely burning to accomplish.

Once you've accomplished or nearly accomplished that goal, you might decide on an even more ambitious goal. Just don't pick something for "someday" – pick a goal that would be great for **today!**

### **10.2.2 Start with your biggest priorities**

This is basically the same as the last point. Yes, doing everything awesome and perfectly would be amazing! But focused goals are *always* more efficient than vague ones.

The *Goal Worksheet* will help you with this – but try to limit yourself to the two or three most important things you want to be able to do in the language. Remember: this isn't permanent. A year from now you can (and should!) do this exercise again and choose a different goal.

### **10.2.3 Be honest**

Most people don't learn languages for the pure enjoyment of doing so. They learn languages because they want to do *something* with that language.

Sometimes that *something* is not fun, exciting or motivating. Frequently, people are learning a language to get a better job, because they are forced to in school, or because they immigrated to the country where the language is spoken.

Sometimes these people honestly have no real desire to achieve that goal. This means low motivation and, very probably, giving up.

**If you can't *honestly* get excited about your goal – throw it out!** Instead, find a goal in the language that you are really burning to accomplish, that is truly interesting, and pursue that first.

Let's say you need to learn business English for your job – but, actually, you

hate your job so every attempt to learn it has been short-lived. However, maybe you *love* American action movies! So instead, make “understanding American action movies without subtitles” your goal.

If you know English well enough to do that, learning business English later will be *much easier!*

### **10.3 Complete the worksheet!**

Ok, if you haven't done it yet – please stop reading *right now*, print out the [Goal Worksheet](#) and complete it. If you only complete one worksheet in this entire book – make it this one! Don't come back here until you've filled it out!

# Chapter 11

## Planning your daily routine

Earlier in [Chapter 4](#), we talked about the importance of time and regularity in language learning. The core idea is that practicing 15 minutes per day (almost two hours per week) is better than practicing even 3 hours, but just once a week.

*Regularity is more important than the raw amount of time you spend!*

When your brain learns a new skill, it is actually changing on a physical and chemical level. This takes time and energy in a very literal way! Spreading out your language learning gives your brain the chance to adapt.

In this section we'll take a brief moment to discuss planning your daily language learning routine. There is a printable [Daily Routine Worksheet](#) to help. Please stop reading and print it out now!

For now, we'll be talking primarily about Parts A and B of the worksheet: *Finding time* and *Activities that could be converted*. When we get to [Chapter 13](#) *Creating the perfect method for you*, you'll have everything you need to complete Part C *Planning your time*.

## 11.1 How to find the time

One of the biggest challenges in life in general, is finding time for all the things we want to do. Obviously things like work, family and friends come first. Frequently, hobbies such as language learning are much lower on the list and it's difficult to set aside time for them.

But language learning doesn't have to be done in a classroom, in front of your computer, or at a desk! A lot of the activities that make up the methods described in this ebook are inherently mobile. For example, listening to audio, reading a book, talking on Skype, etc.

These can be done during the "in between times" or during other tasks that don't require much thinking. We all have these sorts of times every day. For example:

- Commuting to work
- Washing the dishes
- Eating lunch or breakfast
- Buying groceries
- Waiting at the doctor, DMV, etc
- Before our next meeting or class starts

Each of the times might be *very* short, maybe only 5 minutes. But when added up all together, they can represent a pretty big chunk of time – usually *at least* an hour per day.

There are also many activities we already have set aside time for, which can be *converted* to language learning activities. As we'll discuss in more detail in [Section](#)



13.1, when selecting the appropriate content to learn from, I usually recommend taking an activity you already love doing in your native language and start doing it in the language you are learning. This can also get you more language learning time!

For example, before I started reading Harry Potter in Polish, I already set aside time in my day for reading in English: during lunch at work and every night before bed. In total, I probably spent 45 minutes per day reading in English. By switching to reading in Polish, I was able to *convert* this time to language learning time. (But don't convert all your time! More below...)

In [Section 12.2](#), I'll describe the actual daily routine that I used while reading Harry Potter using all of the time that I found for studying Polish.

Please stop reading now and fill out Parts A and B of the [Daily Routine Worksheet](#)!

## 11.2 How to schedule your time

Like we discussed above, it's good to spread your language learning across every day in the week, rather than concentrating it in a single day. In the same way, it's good to spread your language learning over the day in small amounts rather than doing it all in one sitting.

Creating a daily schedule like this is not only good for your brain, but it will help prevent *burn out*. Sitting down to study a language for an hour can seem daunting. After a while you might start to dread starting. But only a few minutes here and there is much easier.

This brings me to my next point: If you don't already have a daily language learning routine, don't be too ambitious! Many people make the mistake of making

their first daily routine really intense; for example, including one or two hours of language learning per day.

**Remember: The only way to fail to learn a language is to give up!**

Making sure that you don't burn out is *extremely* important. If you start out with a more modest daily routine and slowly increase it, you will drastically reduce the chance of burning out and giving up.

**Remember: Doing anything at all, is much better than nothing!**

If you're only doing 15 minutes of language learning per day at first, *that's great!* After a couple weeks or months, you can increase that, if you like.

As a matter of comparison, I did about two hours of language learning when I was reading Harry Potter in 2008. This is the most time I've devoted to language learning per day in my life! Since then, I spend considerably less time with Polish per day.

And I can tell you honestly, that at times it was difficult to sustain two hours per day. The main thing that kept me going was the fact that I *desperately* wanted to find out what happened next in the story.

And I didn't succeed in reaching my goal of two hours per day every day! On the days where I had trouble motivating myself, I would try to do only five minutes. Like I said earlier, something is better than nothing.

After you've planned your language learning method in [Chapter 13](#), you can return to the [Daily Routine Worksheet](#) and plan how to use your newly found time!

## Chapter 12

# Learning a language with Harry Potter

In this section, I'm going to tell you how to do my method *exactly* as I did it. This is written as step-by-step instructions, telling you what to do.

*This isn't because I think this is the only way – or that you should even do it this way!*

Again, the best way to learn a language is with **your own method**, designed specifically for your needs, preferences and learning style. In [Chapter 13](#), we'll work on creating your method.

I've written and spoken about how I learned Polish many, many times on my blog, but only in general terms. Personally, I thought this was enough, because, while the overall framework is important – the specific, mundane details apply to *my method* alone.

But over the past three years, people have asked for these details and step-by-step instructions countless times. I've also noticed that when people ask me

questions about using the method on their own, that they frequently leave out an important step or two.

So, if you don't want to create your own method and would just prefer to follow exactly what I did – this chapter is for you. You'll have the comfort of knowing that this method works efficiently and that you aren't missing anything critical.

However, even if you don't plan on using my method exactly, seeing a complete method and how it relates to the three parts in the framework, my goal and daily routine can be very instructive.

In [Chapter 13](#) you'll be able to see if there are any ways that you could modify the method that would make it even more effective and enjoyable for you!

## 12.1 Required materials

- The book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* written in the language you are learning
- The audio book version of the same book (preferably as MP3s rather than CD audio, because that will probably save you time – who has a CD player anymore?)
- A translating dictionary (from the target language to your native language)
- An MP3 player
- A pencil and eraser
- Two bookmarks
- The free spaced repetition flashcard program [Anki](#)

*Harry Potter* is really an excellent book for language learning for a few reasons:

- It has been translated into about [70 different languages](#)!
- The first book is short and written at a level that 9-year-olds can read ([according to Scholastic](#)).
- You probably already know the story and like it. ☺ If you don't like Harry Potter, see [Section 13.1.1](#), where we discuss picking the best book for you.

I'd also like to point out that my level when I started doing this was considerably lower than Harry Potter! The ideal content is only slightly above your level. Depending on your level and motivation, something else might be better. (See [Section 13.1](#) for more information.)

## 12.2 My daily routine

I chose to devote two hours per day to language learning. *This is a lot!* Using Parts A and B of the [Daily Routine Worksheet](#), you might be able to find two hours of extra time, or you might not. But as we discussed in [Section 11.2](#), it still might not be the best idea to spend two hours per day right away.

In any case, the amount of time that you devote might be more or less. In that case, you can use the percentages to calculate how much time should be given to each activity.

This is approximately what my daily routine looked like:

<i>When</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Activity</i>
In morning before work	15 min.	5-10%	Review my flashcards in Anki
While commuting	15-60 min.	20-25%	Listening to audio book on my MP3 player
While eating lunch	15-30 min.	15-20%	Reading book and underlining unknown words
After work	30-90 min.	40% (see below!)	Looking up unknown words and making flashcards
Before bed	0-30 min.	0-15%	Reading or listening to the book

There are couple things worth noting about this routine:

- A lot of this time was originally unused or converted. For example, in the morning before work I used to read the news. During lunch and before bed I previously read (or listed to audio books) in English.
- The amount of time spent while commuting varied so much depending on my mode of transport (bike, bus or walking) and sometimes I only did it for a little while. Relaxing while commuting to work is also nice. ☺

- I spent *a lot* of time looking up words in the dictionary and making flashcards. This was the case for two reasons:
  - **Harry Potter was *far* above my level!** At that point, I couldn't speak or understand Polish in a real life and my vocabulary was minuscule. Every page contained 20-40 unknown words. I made up for my low level with a high amount of motivation.
  - **Looking up all unknown words in the dictionary is time-consuming!** This method of understanding is slow compared to other methods and I personally chose to look up *every* unknown word. We'll discuss other methods in [Section 13.2](#).
- When planning your routine you should try to spend as little time as possible on busywork (like looking words up in the dictionary and reviewing flashcards) and as much time as possible with the actual content. This is easier if your level is closer to that of the content you chose.

## 12.3 Step-by-step guide

Each of the four steps should be completed *every day*! You can do them all in one sitting, but it's better to spread them out through the day

### 12.3.1 Step 1: Review your flashcards

Every morning begin by reviewing your flashcards in Anki. This will prepare you for reading and listening to the book. The main purpose of the flashcards isn't to memorize the words (although, you will end up memorizing a certain percentage of the words in your deck) – but rather to keep the words fresh in your mind.

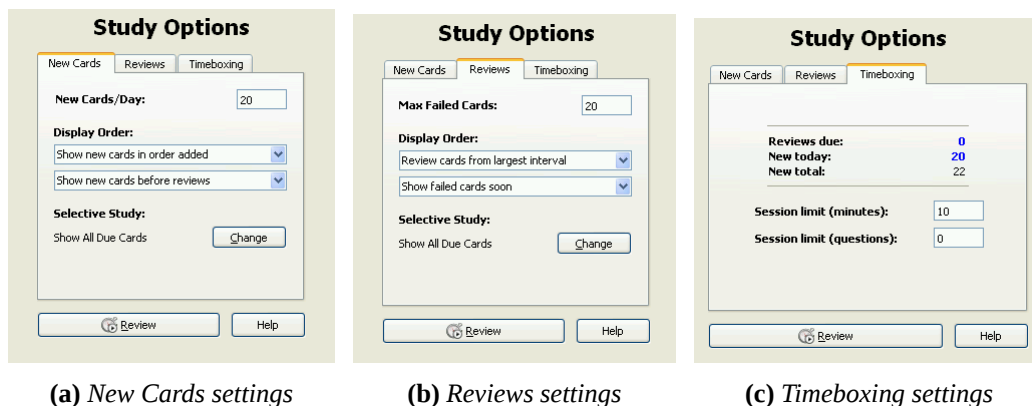
I've discovered that I usually have to meet the same word in 2-3 different contexts *in real content* before it really sticks in my mind. While the flashcards alone aren't the complete solution, they make it so that when I meet the word again, I don't necessarily have to look it up in the dictionary again.

Because this isn't the most important activity and it is busywork, limit yourself to a specific amount of time. I prefer to do only 10-15 minutes per day, maximum. Less is better!

Here are the exact Anki settings that I prefer:

- New Cards:
  - New Cards/Day: **20** (Unless you are adding more than that per day! In that case, increase this value – you'll forget more words, but that's OK.)
  - Display order:
    - \* ***Show new cards in order added***
    - \* ***Show new cards before reviews***
- Reviews
  - Max Failed Cards: **20**
  - Display order:
    - \* ***Review cards from largest interval***
    - \* ***Show failed cards soon***
- Timeboxing
  - Session limit (minutes): **10** (or 15 max but less is better!)
  - Session limit (questions): **0** (this means no limit)





**Figure 12.1:** Anki Study Settings

## 12.3.2 Step 2: Listen

Next, listen to a predetermined amount of the audio book. This could be as little as 5 minutes! If you'd like, you can look at the paper version of the book while you are listening, but don't get distracted by it! At this point, you shouldn't stop the recording or look up any words.

During this step, try to simply listen and enjoy the story. You can do this during another task, but make sure it's something mindless enough that you can really focus, like: washing the dishes, eating, driving, or walking. (I personally *love* listening to audio books while walking.)

I know that for some people grocery shopping is mindless and they can do their listening during it, but for me personally it's too distracting. You'll have to experiment a bit to find the perfect time and activity to do during your listening.

If you are at a lower level, listening to the same section multiple times is extremely helpful. Each time you listen, you're likely to notice new things in the recording! So, maybe you only listen to 5 minutes of audio, but you do it 3 times. At a higher level, this type of repetition is less important and could even be annoying and demotivating.

I followed exactly this pattern: with the first couple books, I listened to sections multiple times. With later books, when my level was higher, I listened to each section only once.

### **12.3.3 Step 3: Read and underline**

Take the text version of the book and begin reading the same section you just listened to. While you're reading, underline all of the words you don't know in pencil.

When you're done, place one of your bookmarks at the place in the paper version of the book where you finished listening. This is your "enjoyment bookmark."

In the next step, we'll be placing another bookmark (the "look up bookmark") where you left off looking up words. This will help you track the difference between them and allow you to adjust the time given to each step.

### **12.3.4 Step 4: Look up words and create flashcards**

Next we're going to go through the underlined words on a predetermined number of pages. When I started reading Harry Potter, I did two pages a day. This is to limit the amount of time you spend looking up words.

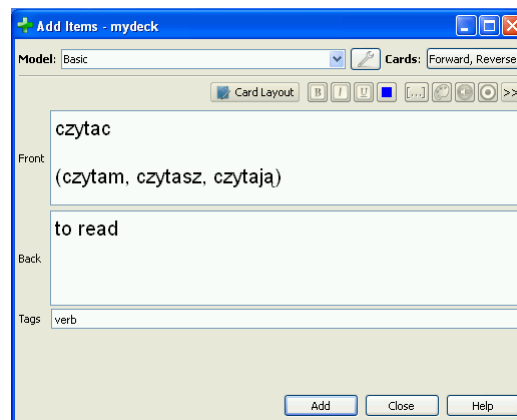
Later, as the number of unknown words per page decreases, you can increase the number of pages per day. Personally, I was able to start doing four pages per day after looking up about 1/3 of the first book. Then I kept increasing the amount of pages per day as I went.

The important thing is to not add too many unknown words to Anki per day and to not spend too much time on this step. While this is an important step, it doesn't activate the LAD and it's basically busywork.

This method of looking up unknown words in the dictionary, is really one of the most time-consuming methods of understanding content. In [Section 13.2](#) we'll discuss other possible methods.

After looking up each unknown word, create a new flashcard in your Anki deck. You do this by clicking the big “plus” sign and using the “Add Items” dialog. There are a lot of ways to create flashcards, but here is how I do mine:

On the front, put the word in the language you are learning. If there is any other information you'd like to record, put it on the lines below the word itself. This could be grammatical information from the dictionary, like the gender of nouns or forms of verbs. Or, you could put the full sentence that you found in the book.



**Figure 12.2:** *Example flashcard in Anki*

On the back, put the translation of the word in your native language. If you put an example sentence, you can put a translation of that as well, if you like.

If you want to generate both “Forward” and “Reverse” flashcards, you can click the button next to “Cards” and make sure both options are checked. I’ve personally tried doing all possible configurations, but I’ve found that I prefer doing only “Forward” cards.

“Reverse” cards are harder, and prove that you have a stronger memory of the word. But reviewing the flashcards in Anki is only a **helper**. The content itself is

the main teacher. In my opinion, the extra time and stress spent on answering the “Reverse” cards isn’t worth it. But feel free to experiment and find what works best for you!

At the end, remember to move your “look up bookmark” to the place where you finished looking up unknown words.

### 12.3.5 Step 5: Optional activities

Once you’ve listened, read, looked up the words, and created the new flashcards in Anki for a particular section of the text – you are done and ready to continue tomorrow. But here are a few optional activities that you can do afterward if you’d like. Personally, I did some of these sometimes but not always.

- **Review your new Anki flashcards right away.** Since you just entered these new words in Anki, reviewing them right away while they’re fresh in your mind can be beneficial.
- **Re-listen to the same part of the text again.** Now that you’ve read the text and looked up the unknown words, you will likely understand a lot more when listening to the text again.

## 12.4 Gauging your progress

One of the most frustrating things about language learning is that it’s hard to “see” your progress. Frequently, weeks would go by and I wouldn’t “feel” any better at Polish. And then I’d be doing something outside my routine, like watching videos in Polish on YouTube and I’d notice that my level had suddenly gotten a ton better!

Of course, I was improving slowly the whole time, I just didn't notice. This lack of visible progress can be very demotivating! Sometimes this is enough to cause people to give up.

This is one of the main differences I've noticed between people who are learning their first foreign language and people who have learned one successfully in the past: people with more experience are more patient with themselves. They don't expect instant progress or give up when things move slowly. They are confident that their language ability is improving, even if they can't see it.

However, I have a few techniques to help you gauge how you're improving and *keep score* as you go. Even if you can't feel it all the time, these metrics will help to reassure you that you are actually making progress!

The exact numbers will depend a lot on your level when you started. Don't worry that you can only look up the words on 2 pages per day but your friend can do 4 or 6 or 8. What we're looking for is the change in the numbers over time. If in the beginning you could only do 2 pages per day, but after a month you're doing 3 pages per day, that's excellent progress!

Here are a few numbers you can track:

- **Number of pages looked up per day** – this isn't the number you read for enjoyment every day, but the number of pages where you've looked up every word in the dictionary and made flashcards. When I first started reading Harry Potter, I could only do 2 pages per day. By the end, I got up to 8!
- **Number of unknown words per page** – when I first started, I averaged 20-40 per page. At the end, this was down to 5 for pages with dialog and 10 for those without.
- **Total number of words in your Anki deck** – if you are truly committed to reviewing your Anki deck over the long term, this represents new words you

will know. By the time I finished Harry Potter my flashcard deck was around 3,000 words! Unfortunately, I've lost the deck so I can't tell you exactly.

- **The projected end date of the book** – if you take the remaining number of pages in the book and divide it by average number of pages per day, you get the number of days until you finish reading the book. As the number of pages you look up per day goes up, the projected end date will get *exponentially* closer! This is really satisfying. 😊

I recommend taking a look at your numbers at the end of every week. I've created a simple [Progress Worksheet](#) which you can use to help track and calculate these numbers.

Also, every couple weeks I recommend listening to old excerpts of the audio book. It's extremely satisfying to listen to an excerpt that gave you lots of trouble previously and have it seem simple now when you listen again!

## Chapter 13

# Creating the perfect method for you!

If you remember from [Chapter 9](#), the three parts of the language learning framework described in this ebook are:

- A source of interesting content in the language – with audio!
- A method to understand this content.
- A system to review and remember what you've learned.

In this chapter, we're going to go over these parts in detail and discuss alternative ways to do them that may be better suited to you than what I described in the previous chapter.

In the end, you will have created your own method. A little experimentation is always necessary, but I'm confident that using the advice here, you will eventually find the *perfect* method for you!

But before you begin, make sure that you've completed the [Goal Worksheet](#) from [Chapter 10](#) and the [Daily Routine Worksheet](#) from [Chapter 11](#).

When you're ready to get started, print out the [Your Method Worksheet](#) and please complete it while you are reading through the rest of this chapter.

## 13.1 Finding the right content

The ideal content for you has several properties:

- **It's *extremely* interesting to you.** It should be something that you are so motivated to do, that you'd love to read/listen/watch/etc it *even in your native language!*
- **It's in line with your language learning goals.** See [Chapter 10](#) to develop your goal, if you haven't already.
- **It has some listening component.** Your brain needs audio!
- **It's at the appropriate level.**

The most difficult property to get right is the level. The ideal content should be on a level slightly higher than your current level. If it's much higher, than it will take much more time and effort to understand and could be demotivating.

$$\text{Ideal content level} = \text{Your level} + 1$$

But you can make up for the difference if you are highly motivated by either the language or the content. If you can find something that you want to understand so badly, that it doesn't matter how hard it is, you will be able to handle something harder. So, actually:



*Ideal content level = Your level + Your motivation + 1*

This is what allowed me to read Harry Potter even though it was considerably higher than my level. Most days I didn't even think about the language, I just thought about the story. I was dying to know what happened next!

This is why reading books or Harry Potter might not be the best content for you! It worked for me, because:

- **I love reading.** The power of a good story is extremely captivating for me. Even in English, once I start reading, it's extremely hard to stop – I just need to know what happens next!
- **I love this story.** I have never read Harry Potter in English. But I had seen the movies and enjoyed them. But I had no idea that I would end up really loving this story as much as I did!

You will find something like that for you! It's a very personal decision and could be pretty much anything:

- Reading books, magazines, newspapers or articles on the internet
- Speaking with people over Skype or in person
- Playing video games in the language
- Watching films, TV shows or even videos on YouTube
- Writing emails or chatting online
- Listening to music, podcasts or audio books
- Participating in online forums or communities

In this section, we'll go over a few of these types of content, discover ways to find the content, and discuss how to choose the best content for you. We can't cover every option, but I'll try to talk about the big ones.

At the end of this section, you'll be able to complete Part A of your method on the [Your Method Worksheet](#).

### **13.1.1 Books**

Unless your level is very high, this should really be books and audio books! Your brain needs audio in order to learn a language. I'd only recommend skipping the audio after you've reached a high level and have already listened to hundreds of hours of the language.

#### **Not too hard**

While you may feel like you should try to read the classic literature of your target language, that's probably not a good idea for the first book – in fact, maybe not even for the 2nd, 3rd or even 10th or 20th book.

Quantity is more important than quality. Reading a dozen popular books you enjoy will likely teach you more than forcing your way through just one of the classics.

For some languages (particularly English), simplified versions of classic novels are available. But every book you read will get easier and easier. Personally, I'd rather wait a little while until I was ready, so that I could enjoy the sense of accomplishment I could get from reading a classic book in its original language.

Of course, if you love reading classics even in your native language and you're extremely motivated – you can disregard this advice.

I frequently recommend looking at books which are popular among young people in a particular age group. In fact, this was exactly my logic with Harry Potter. I thought, “I want to read something a 9-year-old could read.” There are plenty of lists online!

For example, if you’re learning English, here are some popular books for:

- [8 year olds](#)
- [9 year olds](#)
- [10 year olds](#)
- [11 year olds](#)
- ... and so on!

You can find similar lists in every language. You will probably need to use the localized version of Google (i.e. [www.google.pl](http://www.google.pl) for Polish, [www.google.de](http://www.google.de) for German, etc) and search in your target language. [Here](#) is an example Google search in Polish.

### **Not too easy**

Many people advocate reading books for small children (like *See Jack Run*, *Cat in the Hat*, etc). The logic is: “Learn like a child.” **But you are not a child!**

The vocabulary can be rather strange, with a focus on animals, fantastical creatures and silly words. Sometimes the sentence structure is non-standard: intended to be funny or to carry a certain rhythm or rhyme. In other words, it’s not like normal language at all.

Where as books for children around 9 years old and up contain normal language and can frequently be entertaining for adults too! I know plenty of adults who still like Tom Swift, The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, and Harry Potter – although, they might not admit it. ☺

Of course, some people really do like reading books for small children and so they could probably learn a lot from them. But if you don't like reading them in your native language, you probably won't like reading them in your target language, either!

### **Longer is better than shorter**

Starting to read a new book is the hardest part. It takes a while to get to know all the characters, scenes, the style of the author, etc. But after the first few chapters, it will really start to flow.

An individual author will tend to repeat certain vocabulary, especially in an individual book. But also, knowing the rules of the universe in that book and knowing what the characters are like, will help you guess words from context, even if you see them only once in the whole book. For example, if something happens that you know is likely to make a character upset, and the author uses a new adjective that you've never seen before, you can guess it means the character is upset.

So, it's better to read one long story rather than several short stories. Reading several books in a series (like Harry Potter) or even several books by the same author can help you read more, while avoiding the long buildup when starting a new book.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but it really is easier to read a longer book!

## Getting the books

Once you've chosen something, it can actually be a little difficult getting a hold of it. Unless you're learning English and chose something very popular, the bookstores (both online and offline) you usually buy from probably don't have what you want.

If there is a large population of the given language group in a particular place in your city or country, that's a good place to start. We've got large Russian and Hispanic populations in Milwaukee and so they have their own bookstores. I've ordered many of my Polish books and audio books from Chicago.

Unfortunately, real-world bookstores usually only have a small selection of the most popular books, so you're probably going to have to look online. I recommend first trying to buy a digital copy (PDF for the text and MP3 for the audio). This will save on cost, shipping time, and it will reduce the risk of losing your package in the mail.

If you're learning English, here are a few websites:

- [Audible](#)
- [eBooks.com](#)
- [Amazon](#)

Or if you're learning Polish:

- [Audioteka](#)
- [NEXTO](#)
- [Empik](#)

Again, doing a search in the localized Google in your target language will turn up lots of options.

### **13.1.2 Music**

Listening to music is a great way to learn! It's also really easy to find song lyrics online, if you need them to help you understand the song. The main challenge is finding songs and artists in your target language that you like.

If you're learning English you can pretty much ignore the rest of this section since music in English is pretty universal. Even non-native speakers choose to write their lyrics in English to try and gain a broader audience. You probably already have some favorites.

But if you don't, I recommend finding an internet radio station which plays songs in your target language. It's much easier to find a purely internet radio station like this, since real radio stations (which may rebroadcast online) will likely play a ton of music in English. If you're learning Polish, [here](#) is a great one!

While listening, write down the names of artists and songs that you like. Later you can listen to the song again or find more by that artist on YouTube. Despite being a video website, YouTube is really one of the best places online to listen to music for free.

Look up the word for "lyrics" in the language you are learning. Simply googling the name of the song plus "lyrics" will turn up lots of results.

If there is a band you really like you can buy their albums, read about them on the Wikipedia, or maybe even go to one of their shows when they come to your country or when you visit theirs.

If you love music, learning about your favorite artists, and going to see live

music in your native language – then music can provide you with a truly powerful source of motivation! It also gives you a window into the mind and soul of the culture and gives you something to talk about with native speakers.

### 13.1.3 Movies and television

Movies, television and video are great ways to learn because not only do you get the audio – but you also get a visual context to help you understand it. They also tend to contain better representations of informal spoken language than books or music.

And if you already love watching movies or television – they will provide a great drive to keep watching! I know people who have all the episodes of their favorite television shows on DVD and sometimes love to watch a dozen episodes in a row! If you're one those people, you can redirect this energy to language learning.

Unless you're learning English, discovering movies and television shows in the language you are learning can be a little difficult. Here is what I recommend:

- **If you live in the USA, get a Netflix subscription!** They are the most complete, legal source of movies from other countries. Be sure to get an account where they mail you DVDs, there isn't much on "Watch Instantly."
- **Find the websites of the major television networks.** Find the names of the major television networks. On their websites they'll list all the shows they play. Unfortunately, most won't let you watch the shows if you are outside the country.
- **Ask a native speaker.** Any native speaker would be able to tell you about the classic, culturally important movies in their language. It's harder to find

this online, but you can google “the best movies,” of course, translated into the language.

Getting movies and television shows from other countries over the internet *legally* is, unfortunately, extremely difficult. Unless you live in the country, you usually can't even *pay* for it. For example, if you live in the USA, you can buy a subscription to Hulu or Netflix and be able to watch TONs of American movies and shows online. But they won't even let you log in if you are accessing the internet from outside the USA.

If you know someone who is good with computers and the internet, you can ask them to help you connect to the internet through a *proxy server* in the given country. This will make you appear to be connecting to the internet from that country. But be careful! Some proxy servers cost money and since they are frequently used for illegal activity, there is high chance of encountering fraud, viruses and other bad things! I don't recommend trying this unless you have someone with lots of internet experience to help you.

Of course, downloading movies and television shows *illegally* is actually quite easy! **I don't advocate doing this**, but if want to, I'm sure one of your friends can help you.

### 13.1.4 Video games

Video games can be very engrossing and provide their own type of immersion! You deal with the game universe on its own terms. And if it's in another language, that means you will begin to deal with the game in terms of that language.

The best video games for language learning are either:

- **Text intensive games.** This means role-playing games like Final Fantasy. (I



haven't played many of the new ones, but Final Fantasy X even had voice actors for all the major dialog.)

- **Games with a chat component.** Some games that actually contain little text of their own are sometimes played with accompanying voice or text chat.

If you like to play these types of games in your native language, try giving them a shot in the language you are learning! The only disadvantage is that there tends to be less audio.

Someone recently sent me a link to [Cantr](#), a role-playing game that has a separate "world" for each language. They even recommend using it as a way to practice a particular language! It's a traditional, text-based RPG so it's very language intensive. You not only read dialog and descriptions, but you will also be writing lots of your own. Unfortunately, it lacks audio.

[Second Life](#) is an immersive 3D game, where the players build the worlds and decide on their own goals. The game gives absolutely no direction as to the purpose of the game! It includes both voice and text chat. There is a lot to explore and many people to meet.

But almost any game which can be made to contain the language you are learning will be helpful to some degree!

### 13.1.5 Podcasts

Podcasts are similar to radio shows, except they aren't played live. You download each episode in MP3 or OGG format. There are even special programs, called [podcatchers](#), which allow you to subscribe to a podcast, and each new episode will be automatically downloaded when it's released.

You can find podcasts in almost any language and on almost any topic, ranging

from language learning itself to gardening, cooking, computer equipment, movies, video games, comedy, sports, and so on. They also range widely in production style and format. Some consist of one person talking in their basement. Others are professional shows with three hosts in a radio studio. Others are interview shows done on location, recorded directly on an MP3 player.

Some podcasts make transcripts for every episode. This is frequently the best for a language learner, because many systems to understand the content (like those described in [Section 13.2](#)) depend on having a text version of the content.

The biggest directory of podcasts and the most popular podcatcher is [iTunes](#). But there are several other podcast directories online (like [Podcast Pickle](#) and [PodcastDirectory.com](#)) and podcatchers for various environments, including mobile phones.

### **13.1.6 Language Exchange**

Sometimes called “*tandem*”, this is where you meet with someone whose native language is the language you are learning and your native language is the language they are learning. For the first half of the meeting you talk in one language and for the second half you talk in the other.

Nothing can replace practicing your target language with a native speaker. But what if no native speakers live in your city? The best part of language exchange is that you can do it entirely over the internet, using voice chat software like [Skype](#)! If you’re using Skype, you can get programs like [Skype Call Recorder](#) (or [others](#)) to record the conversation to review or study later.

Language exchange can alternatively be done over email or instant messaging, for people who aren’t ready to speak. This is less useful because there is no listening component, but on the other hand, you get a text version which can help you

understand the content.

There are several online directories for finding language exchange partners. The two that I recommend the most are:

- [xLingo](#)
- [Language|Exchange Project](#) – I wrote a [review on my blog](#).

I've personally used language exchange extensively in the later stages of my learning. I usually meet with my partner for one hour. For the first 30 minutes we speak (for example) Polish and then for the second 30 minutes we speak English.

Your language exchange partner can also act as a great resource for the language you are learning and its associated culture. One important thing to remember, however, is that most native speakers don't know the grammar of their own language. They'll know what's correct or incorrect, but not why. For that you'd need to look in a grammar book or ask a teacher.

### **13.1.7 Immersion**

Immersion is great because almost anything can be used as language learning content: the signs, the packaging on food, the store, the library, the post office, parties, concerts, etc.

But immersion is harder than you think! There is a myth that being immersed in a language environment will teach you a language *automatically* and so it's the easiest way to learn a language. Unfortunately, this is far from the truth.

Some people can walk into an immersion situation and do what they'd do naturally and come away speaking a language. But this is only because what that person would do naturally is good for language learning! These tend to be very

social people, without any fear of making mistakes, who can't help themselves but try to communicate with everyone they see. 😊

For the rest of us, a systematic approach to immersion is required. While an immersion environment provides the most resources for learning a language, it's surprisingly easy to avoid them! There are people who have lived in the US for 5, 10, 20, even 50 years, who have never learned English.

The biggest problem is meeting people in a new country where you don't know anyone. If you're going to school or if you have a job already, this is a little easier – but even then there are probably other people who speak your native language who you'll be drawn to.

Here are a few suggestions:

- **Language exchange** – It's not just for the internet! To find a real-world language exchange partner, I recommend putting an ad in the paper or on a notice board, or using websites like [Craigslist](#) or [Gumtree](#).
- **A language helper** – This was a concept I first learned about from [Aaron Myers](#), another language learning blogger. A language helper is not a teacher or a casual conversation partner – it's a native speaker who you *draw the language from* in a systematic way. See [this post](#) on Aaron's blog for more information.
- **Join a club** – This is a great way to meet like-minded people to discuss topics you're interested in. You could join a knitting club, a Latin dance club, a science fiction club, a model train club, or even a book club – whatever you happen to have a passion for! [Facebook](#) and [Meetup.com](#) are great sites for finding clubs.

I recommend Benny Lewis's blog [Fluent in three months](#) for more great tips about

how to make the most out of your time in a foreign country. He's done many interesting things to practice the language, from taking [dance lessons](#) to [speed dating](#).

### **13.1.8 Find something specific to the culture or language**

If you can find something specific to the culture or language, it can provide a special extra motivation.

For example, if there is a famous book in the language, which has never been translated to your native language – reading it in the original language gives you access to something that you otherwise wouldn't have access to. Or if you're learning Japanese, there are anime, manga, haikus, and video games that were never translated (or only translated badly) which you would otherwise not have full access to.

There is a certain magic to this type of content! You might not be able to find something interesting like this in the language you're learning, but if you can – go for it!

### **13.1.9 It might take a couple of tries!**

I got really lucky with Harry Potter. It was the first book I tried to read in Polish. I had no idea if I was even going to like the book or if it would be possible for me to understand. And it turned out great!

But the first thing you try might not work out for you. You could pick something that turns out to be too boring, too hard or too uncomfortable. Don't give up! Go back to the beginning and try to find something else you think might work.

I've had this experience many times with later books. I tried reading some classics and just couldn't keep going. I love science fiction, so I tried to read

Stanisław Lem and, while his vocabulary/grammar is fine, he is constantly making subtle jokes. I could recognize that they were there, but I could not understand them.

It also took me a long time to find a language exchange partner that I worked well with. The first half dozen or so went really badly – and for a time it scared me away from language exchange. But after I finally found the right person, it went great! Since then, I've had five or six excellent language exchange partners. But when I'm looking for someone new, I still find lots of people that I can't work well with.

Remember: the options are infinite! You *will* find something that works for you! Just don't give up!

## 13.2 Understanding the content

After you've found some great content, you're going to need a method to understand it. Remember, your brain learns languages by feeding your LAD content *that you understand* in the language. Just like sources of content, there is an infinite number of methods for understanding it. In this section, we'll try to discuss all the big ones!

There are a few factors to consider when choosing a method:

- **How time consuming is it?** Whatever method you choose, it's going to take some extra time to do. Some methods are more time consuming than others. In general, you want one that takes less time, but there are other factors as well.
- **How appealing/annoying is it?** Some methods are very systematic and

resemble traditional studying. Others are more holistic and focus on experience rather than study. The different types are appealing to different people.

- **What is your threshold of uncertainty?** Some people *must* know what every word on the page means. They cannot rest until they do! Other people are OK with guessing in certain situations. I actually started out in the former group and I seem to have moved mostly into the latter. 😊

Keep these factors in mind while reading this section and completing Part B of the [Your Method Worksheet](#).

### 13.2.1 “Transcript” and a dictionary

I put “transcript” in quotes because it might not really be a transcript, depending on the source content. In the case of an audio book, the “transcript” is actually the text version of the book. Here are some possible configurations:

- Audio book and text version of the book
- Podcast and transcript
- Song and lyrics
- Movie and subtitles (in the original language)

In this method, you look up all the unknown words from the transcript in the dictionary (either a translating or native dictionary). This is the method I used when reading Harry Potter. It’s one of the most time-consuming methods, but it’s good for people who don’t like uncertainty and enjoy systematic study.

Like the “two bookmarks technique” I recommended in [Section 12.3](#), it can be helpful to save the dictionary part for later. While you’re reading or listening, you can simply underline or write down the unknown words and return to look them up later. This makes the method a lot less annoying because you don’t have to constantly stop reading/listening.

Of course, you also don’t have to look up every word. You can restrict yourself to words that stop you from understanding something important or words that you’ve encountered before.

I know that some people are worried about missing something. I was when I first started reading Harry Potter! That’s why I looked up every word. But if you’re reading a book, you’d be surprised how repetitive books are! What I discovered later, was that even if I misunderstood something, I’d probably figure it out later because the author would write about the same thing again, but in different words.

If you are dealing with digital text, there are a few tools that can help make this method less time-consuming. If you’re reading online, here are a few browser plugins:

- [Bubble Translate](#) – For Chrome.
- [Globe Fish](#) – For Firefox.

There are a few more software tools which can help with this method described in [Section 13.5](#).

### **13.2.2 Full translation**

In this method, you use a full translation of the content in your native language. At a low level, you’d probably read the full translation; but at a higher level, you’d only refer to it when you don’t understand.



This is less time consuming than the previous method, but provides a little more uncertainty. Translations frequently have very different structure from the original, and many words have several different senses where only one is represented in the translation. This can make it difficult to know for sure which part of the original means what.

Depending on the source of your content, the translation can take many forms:

- Two separate books: one in your target language and one in your native language
- A dual language book (on the left page it's your target language and on the right it's your native language)
- Subtitles translated into your native language

**But whatever the form – I recommend that you consume the content in your target language first and the translation second!**

Some people think it's better to read the original after they already know what it means. But I disagree. I think you have the most motivation if you haven't read the translation yet. It really encourages you to try and understand the target language first – and I think that's important. Afterward, you'll read the translation and probably have some “aha!” moments.

If you read the translation first, you could get caught “just going through the motions.” Since you already know what the given section means, you can just pass your eyes over it and not even try! Of course, you could do that the other way around, but I think the temptation is less.

All that said, while I've heard about a lot of people who've had success with this method: I don't personally like it. I prefer using the previous method, where I only look up individual words. That way the only full sentences in my head are

in the target language. With a full translation, I worry about my memory getting polluted by my native language.

Not everyone has this problem – but I thought I’d bring it up in case you are like me! 😊

### **13.2.3 Context**

This is where you guess the meaning from other clues. Those clues could be the visuals in a film, the facial expressions of the person you’re talking to, or the type of conversation (i.e. there are only a few things a waiter is likely to say).

This is the most holistic method but it requires you to tolerate the most uncertainty. It has no systematic component and relies entirely on your intuition. Certain types of content give you more clues than others, but in general, this technique requires that your level be very close to the level of the content.

I think everyone guesses from context on occasion. But there are actually a few language learners that insist on using *only* context to learn! This is most appealing to people who hate systematic study and prefer holistic and experience-based learning.

Unfortunately, until you reach a high level, using only context makes it significantly harder to find the right content for you. It has to be at the perfect level and contain lots of clues. This is easiest to achieve when the source of your content is another person because they can simplify their language to your level and keep providing more clues (ex. gesture, draw a picture, etc) until you understand.

Once you’re at a high level, understanding from context becomes easier and easier because each word you already know provides clues to the words you don’t know. At my level with Polish, I rely on context quite a bit.

## 13.3 Review and repetition

Review and repetition are very important in language learning! Like we discussed in the theory part, this is *most important* with vocabulary. Grammatical knowledge is learned unconsciously, so the best thing we can do for it is to simply experience the language *more often*! However, vocabulary is memorized consciously, like any other information. This means you can benefit quite a bit from purposeful effort to review!

There are several systems (and non-systems) to review vocabulary. In this section, we're going to talk about a few of the most popular.

At the end of this section, you'll be able to complete Part C of your method on the [Your Method Worksheet](#).

### 13.3.1 Review happens naturally

Back in [Section 7.1](#), we discussed a study that found that, on average, about 80% of any written English text is made up of the 2,000 most common words. Some learners hear this information and think they should get a list of the 2,000 most common words and start memorizing!

But like we discussed earlier, vocabulary is most effectively learned in context – not from a list. However, this information is useful! It means that you probably don't need a system to review the 2,000 most common words. Simply by experiencing the language, you will encounter them *a lot*!

The most holistic method of review is to simply experience the language more and allow review to happen naturally. If a word is important, you will likely meet it again!

The same class of learners we discussed in [Section 13.2.3](#), who prefer *only* to

learn from context, usually also prefer to *only* review words naturally. This works best when you consume content very close to your level, and lots of content on the same topic or by the same author (i.e. all the Harry Potter books, or 50 popular rock songs, or 10 podcasts about computer equipment).

But for me personally, it's hard to restrict myself to material at my level or on a single topic. I'm always dying to consume something new! If you're like me, then a system to review vocabulary can be very useful.

### **13.3.2 Personal word lists and paper flashcards**

Perhaps the simplest system (but not necessarily the most efficient) to review and repeat vocabulary is to keep a personal *word list*. Every time you encounter a new word, you write it on your list along with a translation or something else to help you understand its meaning.

Occasionally, you can look over the words on your list and review them. It can be helpful to cover the translations and test yourself. I've personally always preferred flashcards to test myself. When I was learning Russian, I recorded the words I was learning directly on paper flashcards (rather than in a list). I'd carry them with me everywhere so I could review throughout the day.

The main disadvantage of this system is that it doesn't work with a lot of words. When I was reading Harry Potter, I encountered *thousands* of new words! If I had made paper flashcards, I wouldn't have been able to carry them with me, or even review all of them when I wanted to. It would have been similar with a word list.

There are a couple of systems for managing flashcards and word lists which can help with this problem:

- [Gold List Method](#) – A method for managing and reviewing word lists devel-

oped by David James, an Englishman and Polyglot living in Poland.

- Spaced repetition – which we’ll discuss in the next section.

### 13.3.3 Spaced repetition systems

Spaced repetition is a learning technique that helps you learn and retain *many* facts over a long period of time.

Unless you have a photographic memory, you likely won’t remember a word you’ve seen just once. At least not for long! You will need to forget and relearn that word several times before it actually sticks.

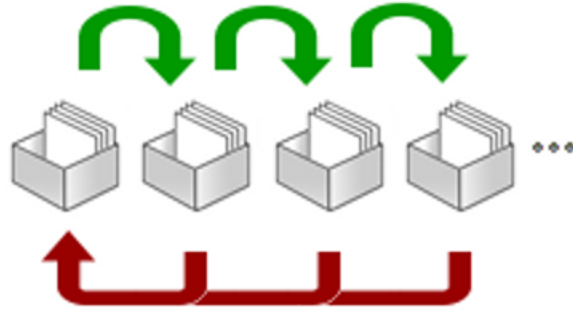
Spaced repetition takes advantage of this fact and also helps you know which words to review and how often.

#### How does it work?

The original spaced repetition system (SRS) is the [Leitner System](#), developed by Sebastian Leitner in the 1970s. It uses paper flashcards and a series of boxes.

Let’s say that today you learned that the word for mother in Polish is **matka**. So, you write a flashcard that says “matka” on the front and “mother” on the back. You place this flashcard in the first box, which contains cards you review every day.

Tomorrow, you review all the cards in the first box, which includes the card you just made for “matka.” If you answer correctly, you put the flashcard in the second box, which contains cards you review every 3 days. If after 3 days you answer correctly again, it goes into the third box, which gets reviewed every 5 days. And so on.



**Figure 13.1:** *The Leitner System*

If at any time you answer incorrectly, the flashcard returns to the first box. This way, cards you know better get reviewed less often – and words you know less well get reviewed more often. If the intervals are set correctly, you will be reminded of a word just as you were about to forget it!

These days, there are many computerized SRSs which allow you to avoid the trouble of managing paper flashcards and boxes in the physical world. Some will even work on your mobile phone or tablet, so you can review anywhere! The two most popular are [SuperMemo](#) and [Anki](#), which I personally recommend – plus, it’s free!

### **Advantages of spaced repetition**

- **Retain facts longer:** Spaced repetition works by taking advantage of the psychological *spacing effect*, which states that we more easily remember facts “studied a few times over a long period of time, rather than studied repeatedly in a short period of time” (from the Wikipedia).
- **Learn more facts:** With spaced repetition, you aren’t reviewing everything every day, but only those things you need to review. This way you can use spaced repetition to learn not just a couple dozen facts, but even thousands! Eventually, some facts will only need to be reviewed after intervals measured

in years.

- **Never forget anything!:** If you use a computerized SRS like [Anki](#) to manage your learning and to review every day, you will never lose track of any facts you have learned. Even if a card is set to review after 2 years, if you forget it, you will be reminded in 2 years. Nothing can slip through the cracks!

Read [this article](#) on the [Anki website](#) for a more detailed explanation of the advantages of using a computerized SRS.

When I was reading Harry Potter, I had *thousands* of flashcards. Without using a computerized SRS, I don't think I would have been able to learn all that vocabulary.

### 13.3.4 Mnemonic devices

This isn't strictly a *review* technique, but rather a system for memorizing vocabulary or other facts – so I believe it belongs in this section. I've never personally used any mnemonic devices, but I've talked with lots of language learners who have used them very successfully!

There are many different mnemonic techniques:

- **Using the first letter of items in a list to create a phrase.** The phrase “My Very Elegant Mother Just Served Us Nuts” is used to remember the names of the planets in our solar system starting from the sun: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune.
- **Building a phrase out of something that sounds similar in your native language.** Ghil'ad Zuckermann proposed the following mnemonic phrase

for remembering the Hebrew word *ohel* (tent): “Oh hell, there’s a raccoon in my tent.” (from the [Wikipedia](#)).

- **Creating images or stories to remember words.** – Benny Lewis visualizes a *player* walking down the beach to remember that the Spanish word “playa” means beach.
- **Roman room method.** An ancient mnemonic technique based on picturing a room and associating items in it with the items you want to remember.
- **Visualizing words in different colors.** If you want to remember the gender of nouns, you could visualize all female nouns in pink and all masculine nouns in blue.

Unfortunately, since this is a big topic and one that I don’t know very well, I won’t be discussing it in detail here. However, I’ve found a few links that might help you in your search for mnemonic techniques:

- The [article on Mnemonics](#) in the Learn Any Language Wiki.
- About the [Roman room method](#) on psychology.wikia.com.
- “[How to Learn any Language](#)” by Barry Farber (specifically the chapter called *Harry Lorayne’s Magic Memory Aid*).

*(If you know any great resources about mnemonics, please [let me know!](#))*

## 13.4 Do I need to understand everything?

I’ve received a lot of emails that say something like:



When we are listening to podcasts (for example), do you think it's worth it to try and understand as much as possible? Should we listen to the same recording over and over until we understand everything?

Some people – particularly people who are learning their first foreign language – feel that they must understand everything before moving on. So they'll repeat the same material over and over.

Repetition can be helpful, especially when you're just starting out. **But excessive repetition can very detrimental!**

I've written on my blog that there are [diminishing returns in language learning](#). When you're just starting out, you learn very, very quickly. You can even go from beginner to intermediate in 3-6 months if you devote a lot of time to it. However, over time your progress slows. It can sometimes take years to go from intermediate to advanced.

**The same idea applies to repetition!** In the first few repetitions you will learn a ton. But after a while you learn less and less with each repetition.

### **13.4.1 Lots of small successes lead to big success**

Let's say you're listening to short podcasts (ex: 10 minutes). You listen to the podcast once or twice. Then you go through the transcript and look up all the unknown words and make flashcards. After reviewing the flashcards a few times, you listen to the podcast a couple more times.

So long as: (1) you understand the general idea, (2) you enjoy yourself, and (3) you learn *something* new – **you are ready to move on to the next podcast!**

Yes, there will be things you don't understand. There will be new vocabulary you don't learn. But you learned *something!* So you're a little better with the

language than you were before.

All these little successes add up and will eventually lead to big success.

### 13.4.2 The greatest danger

The most important thing is that you **don't give up!**

When people repeat the same material over and over it can get boring. It can be frustrating because you feel like you are never making any progress. It can stop being enjoyable.

All of these things lead people to give up and **the only way you can fail to learn a language is by giving up!**

Try to be conscious of your feelings toward your study activities: they should continue to be enjoyable and interesting. If you feel yourself burning out: take a break or try something different. Just don't give up!

## 13.5 Software solutions

The ideas I'm presenting in this book aren't unique – particularly in the theory part! So, it should be no surprise that several different people and companies have created software to help make variations on this method less time-consuming and minimize the busy work.

All of the ones I'm aware of help you understand by translating unknown words into your native language. Some of them focus on only one or two parts, but a few offer *complete solutions* which help you find content, understand it and review it later.

### 13.5.1 LingQ

[LingQ](#) is a commercial web application from Steve Kaufmann. It has support for learning English, French, Spanish, Japanese, Italian, German, Russian, Chinese, Portuguese, Swedish, Korean, Arabic, Czech, Polish, Dutch, Norwegian, Finnish, Hebrew, Turkish, Esperanto and Latin.

There is a wide library of texts and you can add your own. Many have audio recordings! You can click on an unknown word in a text and receive a translation in your native language. They have automatic translations via a couple of dictionaries or you can use translations from the other users or create your own.

Flashcards are created for each unknown word, but LingQ's flashcard system doesn't take advantage of spaced repetition.

While it allows you to learn a plethora of languages, it's support for users of languages other than English isn't great. You will likely be dealing with translations into English.

There is a free version but it limits you to having 100 flashcards. To really enjoy the benefits of this method, you need to read pretty extensively and you'll hit that limit rather quickly. The cheapest version without this limit is \$10/month.

### 13.5.2 Bibliobird

[Bibliobird](#) is an Open Source web application that my wife and I maintain. Right now it only has support for Poles learning English. We'd love to add more languages but it's limited by our time and knowledge. However, as an Open Source project, anyone else can jump in and help us to improve it!

Right now, all of the texts are created by us and have two audio recordings: one at natural speed and the other slower. In the near future, we're planning to allow

users to add their own texts.

Like LingQ, you click on a word and receive a translation in your native language. This automatically creates a flashcard that you can review in Anki or with our simple web interface to Anki.

Unlike LingQ, the translations aren't automatic and we maintain our dictionary ourselves. This means that it supports things like idioms and phrasal verbs. So, you're sure to be getting a good translation.

**At the moment everything on Bibliobird is free!**

Please join us at [Bibliobird.com](http://Bibliobird.com) and help create the best language learning web application on the internet! *I know that this is shameless self-promotion, but this is my ebook so I get to.* ☺

### 13.5.3 Partial solutions

Here are a few software packages that help during one or two of the parts:

- [Lingro](#) – Allows you to copy-and-paste a text, upload a file or provide a URL. You can click on unknown words, receive a translation and add them to a word list. It's dictionary data is Open Source, but not the code.
- [WordChamp](#) – A commercial web application that also allows you to copy-and-paste a text or provide a URL. You can click on unknown words and receive a translation, but not save them for review.
- [Learning with texts](#) – An Open Source application whose most popular installation is on the *Fluent in 3 Months* blog [here](#). It has all the same features as Lingro but doesn't have its own dictionary and you can review unknown words as flashcards.

# Appendix A

## Worksheets

In this appendix, you will find links to printable PDFs for all the worksheets referenced earlier in this ebook. Please print them out and complete them as instructed!

- [Goal Worksheet](#) from [Chapter 10](#).
- [Daily Routine Worksheet](#) from [Chapter 11](#).
- [Progress Worksheet](#) from [Section 12.4](#).
- [Your Method Workshet](#) from [Chapter 13](#).

# Appendix B

## Further reading

### B.1 Theoretical resources

- There is a lot of discussion in linguistics about the distinction between language learning (conscious) vs language acquisition (unconscious). If you want to get deeper into the theory, you can [read this book online \(free!\)](#) called *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* by [Dr. Stephen Krashen](#). There are other, newer books available but not quite as free. ☺
- [Steve Kaufmann](#) is a popular language learning blogger and accomplished polyglot (he speaks 11 languages). He is one of the most vocal proponents of using Stephen Krashen's research to construct real practical language learning methods. His book [The Way of the Linguist](#) is definitely worth reading!

## B.2 Language learning blogs

Here are some of my favorite language learning blogs. This list is by no means complete! I apologize to anyone I may have left out.

- [The Everyday Language Learner](#) by Aaron Myers – one of the rare language learning blogs that gives great advice for ordinary people, who aren't necessarily as obsessed with language learning as the ordinary language learning blogger. Aaron has also other several ebooks of his own!
- [Language Learning Tips](#) by [Grzegorz Łobiński](#) – Everyday Grzegorz posts a new one-line peice of advice from famous people and other language learning bloggers. He has an impressive collection of other language learning websites as well (click his name above).
- [The Linguist on Language](#) by Steve Kaufmann – one of the first people to expose me to the theory by which the human brain learns languages.
- [All Japanese All The Time](#) by Khatzumoto – wonderful sense of humor and some of the most powerful one-line pieces of advice in the language learning blog-o-sphere.
- [Fluent in Three Months](#) by Benny Lewis – while I sometimes disagree with the techniques Benny uses (technique is very personal!), his motivational material is excellent and his advice for learning in an immersion situation is *second to none!*
- [Blog o nauce języków obcych](#) by Evagelia Mylonaki – Great for many other reasons but it's probably the best resource on the “shadowing” method in the Polish language.