

How to Learn Any Language *Fast* and Never Forget It



Fluent Forever

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Stab, Stab, Stab

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.
If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

—Nelson Mandela

Americans who travel abroad for the first time are often shocked to discover that, despite all the progress that has been made in the last 30 years, many foreign people still speak in foreign languages.

—Dave Barry

Language learning is a sport. I say this as someone who is in no way qualified to speak about sports; I joined the fencing team in high school in order to get out of gym class. Still, stabbing friends with pointy metal objects resembles language learning more than you might think. Your goal in fencing is to stab people *automatically*. You spend time learning the names of the weapons and the rules of the game, and you drill the proper posture, every parry, riposte, and lunge. Finally, you play the game, hoping to reach that magical moment when you forget about the rules: Your arm moves of its own accord, you deftly parry your friend's sword, and you stab him squarely in the chest. Point!

We want to walk up to someone, open our mouths, forget the rules, and speak automatically. This goal can seem out of reach because languages seem hard, but they're not. There is no such thing as a "hard" language; any idiot can speak whatever language his parents spoke when he was a child. The real challenge lies in finding a path that conforms to the demands of a busy life.

In the midst of my own busy life as an opera singer, I needed to learn German, Italian, French, and Russian. Out of those experiences, I found the underpinnings for this book. My methods are the results of an obsessive need to tinker, research, and tinker again. My language-learning toolbox has, over time, turned into a well-oiled machine that transforms fixed amounts of daily time into noticeable, continuous improvement in my languages and in the languages of every person I've taught. In sharing it, I hope to enable you to visit the peculiar world of language learning. In the process, you'll better understand the inner workings of your mind and the minds of others. You'll learn to speak a new language, too.

BEGINNINGS

So far, my favorite moment of this crazy language-learning adventure took place in a Viennese subway station in 2012. I was returning home from a show when I saw a Russian colleague coming toward me. Our common language had always been German, and so, in that language, we greeted and caught up on the events of the past year. Then I dropped the bomb. "You know, I speak Russian now," I told her in Russian.

The expression on her face was priceless. Her jaw actually dropped, like in the cartoons. She stammered, "What? When? How?" as we launched into a long conversation in Russian about language learning, life, and the intersection between the two.

My first attempts to learn languages were significantly less jaw dropping. I went to Hebrew school for seven years. We sang songs, learned the alphabet, lit lots of candles, drank lots of grape juice, and didn't learn much of anything. Well, except the alphabet; I had that alphabet *nailed*.

In high school, I fell in love with my Russian teacher, Mrs. Nowakowsky. She was smart and pretty, she had a wacky Russian last name, and I did whatever she asked, whenever she asked. Five years later, I

had learned a few phrases, memorized a few poems, and learned that alphabet quite well, thank you very much. By the end of it, I got the impression that something was seriously wrong. Why can I only remember alphabets? Why was everything else so *hard*?

Fast-forward to June of 2004, at the start of a German immersion program for opera singers in Vermont. At the time, I was an engineer with an oversized singing habit. This habit demanded that I learn basic German, French, and Italian, and I decided that jumping into the pool was the only way I'd ever succeed. Upon my arrival, I was to sign a paper pledging to use German as my only form of communication for seven weeks, under threat of expulsion without refund. At the time, this seemed unwise, as I didn't speak *a word of German*. I signed it anyway. Afterward, some advanced students approached me, smiled, and said, "Hallo." I stared at them blankly for a moment and replied, "Hallo." We shook hands.

Five insane weeks later, I sang my heart out in a German acting class, found a remote location on campus, and stealthily called my girlfriend. "I think I'm going to be an opera singer," I told her in whispered English. On that day, I decided to become fluent in the languages demanded by my new profession. I went back to Middlebury College in Vermont and took German again. This time, I reached fluency. I moved to Austria for my master's studies. While living in Europe in 2008, I went to Perugia, Italy, to learn Italian. Two years later, I became a cheater.

CHEATERS OCCASIONALLY PROSPER: THE THREE KEYS TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

This book would not exist if I had not cheated on a French test. I'm not proud of it, but there it is. First, some background. The Middlebury Language Schools offer five levels of classes: absolute beginner, "false" beginner (people who have forgotten what they've learned), intermediate, advanced, and near fluent. At the time of the test, I

was an absolute beginner in French, but I had already learned a Romance language, and I wanted to be with the “false” beginners. So, for my third stint at Middlebury, I cheated on the online placement test, using Google Translate and some grammar websites. Don’t tell Middlebury.

A month later, I received my regrettable results. “Welcome and congratulations!” it began. “You have been placed in the intermediate level!” Shit. I had three months to learn a year’s worth of French or look like an idiot at the entrance interview. These interviews are serious business. You sit in a room with a *real, live French person*, you chat for fifteen minutes about life, and you leave with a final class placement. You can’t cheat; you can either speak French or make sad faces and wave your hands around like a second-rate Parisian mime.

As I was in the middle of completing master’s degrees in opera and art song, the only free time I had was an hour on the subway every day and all day on Sundays. I frantically turned to the Internet to figure out how to learn a language faster. What I found was surprising: there are a number of incredibly powerful language-learning tools out there, but no single program put all of the new methods together.

I encountered three basic keys to language learning:

1. Learn pronunciation first.
2. Don’t translate.
3. Use spaced repetition systems.

The first key, **learn pronunciation first**, came out of my music conservatory training (and is widely used by the military and the missionaries of the Mormon church). Singers learn the pronunciation of languages first because we need to sing in these languages long before we have the time to learn them. In the course of mastering the sounds of a language, our ears become attuned to those sounds, making vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and speaking come much more quickly. While we’re at it, we pick up a snazzy, accurate accent.

The second key, **don't translate**, was hidden within my experiences at the Middlebury Language Schools in Vermont. Not only can a beginning student skip translating, but it was an essential step in learning how to think in a foreign language. It made language learning *possible*. This was the fatal flaw in my earlier attempts to learn Hebrew and Russian: I was practicing translation instead of speaking. By throwing away English, I could spend my time building fluency instead of decoding sentences word by word.

The third key, **use spaced repetition systems** (SRSs), came from language blogs and software developers. SRSs are flash cards on steroids. Based upon your input, they create a custom study plan that drives information deep into your long-term memory. They supercharge memorization, and they have yet to reach mainstream use.

A growing number of language learners on the Internet were taking advantage of SRSs, but they were using them to memorize translations. Conversely, no-translation proponents like Middlebury and Berlitz were using comparatively antiquated study methods, failing to take advantage of the new computerized learning tools. Meanwhile, nobody but the classical singers and the Mormons seemed to care much about pronunciation.

I decided to use all of these methods at once. I used memorization software on my smartphone to get the French into my head, and I made sure that none of my flash cards had a word of English on them. I began making flash cards for the pronunciation rules, added a bunch of pictures for the nouns and some verbs, learned the verb conjugations, and then built up to simple French definitions of more abstract concepts. By June, in my hour a day on the subway, I had learned three thousand words and grammar concepts. When I arrived at Middlebury, I waited in a room for my entrance interview in French. This interview was meant to ensure that I hadn't done anything stupid, like cheat on my online placement test. It was the first time I had ever spoken French in my life. The teacher sat down and said, "*Bonjour*," and I responded right back with the very first word that came into my brain: "*Bonjour*."

So far, so good. As our conversation evolved, I was amazed to find that I knew all the words she was saying, and I knew all the words I needed to respond. I could think in French! It was halting, but it was French. I was stunned. Middlebury bumped me into the advanced class. In those seven weeks, I read ten books, wrote seventy pages worth of essays, and my vocabulary grew to forty-five hundred words. By the beginning of August, I was fluent in French.

THE GAME PLAN

What is fluency? Each of us will find a different answer to this question. The term is imprecise, and it means a little less every time someone writes another book, article, or spam email with a title like "U Can B FLUENT in 7 DAY5!1!" Still, we maintain an image of fluency in our minds: a summer afternoon in a Parisian café, casually chatting up the waitress without needing to worry about verb conjugations or missing words in our vocabularies. Beyond that café, we must decide individually how far we wish to go.

I would confidently describe myself as fluent in German. I've lived in Austria for six years and will happily discuss anything with anyone, but I certainly needed to dance around a few missing words to get out of a €200 fine for my rental car's broken gas cap. (Apparently, the word for "gas cap" is *Tankdeckel*, and the words for "I don't give a damn if I'm the first person to drive this car, the spring holding the gas cap closed was defective" start with "*Das ist mir völlig Wurst . . .*" and go on from there.) You'll have to determine for yourself whether your image of fluency includes political discussions with friends, attending poetry readings, working as a secret agent, or lecturing on quantum physics at the Sorbonne.

We struggle to reach *any* degree of fluency because there is *so* much to remember. The rulebook of the language game is too long. We go to classes that discuss the rulebook, we run drills about one rule or another, but we never get to play the game. On the off chance that we

ever reach the end of a rulebook, we've forgotten most of the beginning already. Moreover, we've ignored the *other* book (the vocabulary book), full of thousands upon thousands of words that are just as hard to remember as the rules.

Forgetting is our greatest foe, and we need a plan to defeat it. What's the classic language-learning success story? A guy moves to Spain, falls in love with a Spanish girl, and spends every waking hour practicing the language until he is fluent within the year. This is the immersion experience, and it defeats forgetting with brute force. In large part, our proud, Spanish-speaking hero is successful because he never had any time to forget. Every day, he swims in an ocean of Spanish; how could he forget what he had learned? I learned German in this way, given an opportunity to leave my job, move to Vermont, and cut off all ties to the English-speaking world for two full summers. Immersion is a wonderful experience, but if you have steady work, a dog, a family, or a bank account in need of refilling, you can't readily drop everything and devote *that* much of your life to learning a language. We need a more practical way to get the right information into our heads and prevent it from leaking out of our ears.

I'm going to show you how to stop forgetting, so you can get to the actual game. And I'm going to show you what to remember, so that once you start playing the game, you're good at it. Along the way, we'll rewire your ears to hear new sounds, and rewire your tongue to master a new accent. We'll investigate the makeup of words, how grammar assembles those words into thoughts, and how to make those thoughts come out of your mouth without needing to waste time translating. We'll make the most of your limited time, investigating which words to learn first, how to use mnemonics to memorize abstract concepts faster, and how to improve your reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills as quickly and effectively as possible.

I want you to understand how to use the tools I've found along the way, but I also want you to understand *why* they work. Language learning is one of the most intensely personal journeys you can undertake.

You are going into your own mind and altering the way you *think*. If you're going to spend months or years working at that goal, you'll need to believe in these methods and make them your own. If you know how to approach the language game, you can beat it. I hope to show you the shortest path to that goal, so that you can forget the rules and start playing already.

After I learned German, I thought, "*Ach!* If I could just go back in time and tell myself a few things, I would have had a *much* easier time with this language!" I had precisely the same thought after Italian, French, Russian (which I finally learned in 2012), and Hungarian (2013's project). This book is my time machine. If I squint my eyes just right, then *you* are monolingual *me* from nine years ago, and I'm creating a time paradox by helping you avoid all of the pitfalls and potholes that led me to make my time machine in the first place. You know how it is.

HOW LONG DOES FLUENCY TAKE?

To estimate the time you'll need, we'll need to consider your fluency goals, the language(s) you already know, the language you're learning, and your daily time constraints. As I said earlier, there is no such thing as a hard language. There *are*, however, languages that will be harder for *you* to learn, because they aren't in the same family as the language(s) you already know. Japanese is difficult for English speakers to learn for the same reason that English is difficult for Japanese speakers; there are precious few words and grammatical concepts that overlap in both languages, not to mention the entirely different alphabets involved. In contrast, an English speaker learning French has much less work to do. English vocabulary is 28 percent French and 28 percent Latin. As soon as an English speaker learns proper French pronunciation, he already knows thousands of words.

The US Foreign Service Institute ranks languages by their approximate difficulty for native English speakers (see Appendix 2). In my experience, their estimates are spot-on. As they predicted, Rus-

sian (a level 2 language) took me nearly twice as much time as French (a level 1 language), and I suspect that Japanese (a level 3 language) will take me twice as much time as Russian. I reached a comfortable intermediate “I can think in French and use a monolingual dictionary” level in three months, working for an hour a day (plus weekend binges), and a similar level for Russian in six months at thirty to forty-five minutes a day (plus weekend binges). I then used seven to eight weeks of intensive immersion to bring both of those languages to advanced “comfortable in a cafe, comfortable chatting about whatever, somewhat uncomfortable describing car problems” levels. I’ve seen similar results with my students. Without an immersion program, I suspect advanced French would take five to eight months, working for thirty to forty-five minutes per day on your own. Level 2 languages like Russian and Hebrew should be twice that, and level 3 languages like Chinese, Arabic, Japanese, and Korean should take four times as long as French.

These harder languages do take time, but there’s no reason you can’t learn them. You’ve already met the only prerequisite: you’re interested. Think about exercise for a moment. To succeed in an exercise routine, we need to enjoy it or we’ll drop it. Most of us don’t have six-pack abs or fit into a size 2 dress. I’ve certainly tried for the abs (I gave up on the size 2 dress long ago), but I never succeeded, because I rarely *enjoy* exercise. Those of us who *do*, succeed. Successful gym rats learn to find the joy (and endorphins) in grueling daily workouts. The rest of us can push ourselves into the gym with willpower, but if we don’t find it enjoyable, we’re unlikely to continue for the six to twenty-four months we need to see results. Fitness plans keep shrinking in time—30-Minute Fitness, the 10-Minute Solution, Ultimate Physical Fitness in 5 Minutes, the 3-Minute Workout—in an attempt to make something that’s difficult seem more palatable. But no matter what, we’re still going to be a sweaty, achy mess at the end of it, and getting ourselves fired up to do it every day is hard in the short term and harder in the long term.

As long as language learning is hard, we’ll run into the same prob-

lems. Who enjoys drilling grammar and memorizing word lists? Even if I promise you *Fluency in 30 Seconds a Day*, you're going to have a hard time sticking to it if it's unpleasant.

We're going to drop the boring stuff and find something more exciting. The tools I've assembled here are effective. Much more important, they're fun to use. We enjoy learning; it's what addicts us to reading newspapers, books, and magazines and browsing websites like *Lifehacker*, Facebook, Reddit, and the *Huffington Post*. Every time we see a new factoid (e.g., "In AD 536, a dust cloud blotted out the sun over Europe and Asia for an entire year, causing famines that wiped out populations from Scandinavia to China. No one knows what caused it"), the pleasure centers of our brains burst into activity, and we click on the next link. In this book, we're going to addict ourselves to language learning. The discovery process for new words and grammar will be our new Facebook, the assembly process for new flash cards will be a series of quick arts-and-crafts projects, and the memorization process will be a fast-paced video game that's just challenging enough to keep us interested.

There's no coincidence here; we learn better when we're having fun, and in looking for the fastest ways to learn, I naturally ended up with the most enjoyable methods. My favorite thing about language learning is this: I can basically play video games as much as I like without suffering deep, existential regret afterward (e.g., "I can't *believe* I just wasted six hours of my life playing stupid games on Facebook"). I spend thirty to sixty minutes a day playing on my smartphone or watching TV. (The TV series *Lost* is *awesome* in Russian.) I get a language out of it, I feel productive, and I have fun. What's not to like?

Let's learn how to play.

DO THIS NOW: THE PATH FORWARD

An organizational note: over the course of this book, I'm going to introduce you to a *lot* of tools and resources. If you ever forget which one

is which, you'll find them all in the Glossary of Tools and Terms at the end of this book, along with a brief explanation. With that said, let's get started.

I intend to teach you *how* to learn, rather than what to learn. We can't discuss every word, grammatical system, and pronunciation system that exists, so you'll need some additional resources specific to your language of choice. Speaking of which, you should probably begin by choosing a language to learn.

Choose Your Language

Choose a language based upon employment opportunities, difficulty, availability of resources, or number of speakers, but in the end, choose a language that you *like*. A reader on my website once asked me whether he should learn Russian or French. His relatives spoke Russian, he *loved* the culture, but he was worried about the difficulty. French seemed like a safe alternative.

Never settle for *safe* when you can have fun instead. Your language will become a constant companion, living in your head. If you *like* your language, then you'll have fun studying it, and when you have fun, you learn faster.

You have many resources at your disposal.

Language Books

Get yourself some books. Someone sat down and spent months (or years, heaven forbid) organizing the information you need, and you can have all of that effort in the palm of your hand for \$15–\$25. Thank you, Herr Gutenberg. In Appendix 1, I list my favorite picks for the top eleven languages you're most likely to be studying. If your language isn't there, go to my website, *Fluent-Forever.com*. I aim to have book recommendations for as many languages as people want to learn.

GET THESE NOW

A good grammar book will walk you through your language's grammar in a thoughtful, step-by-step manner.¹ On the way, it will introduce you to a thousand words or so, give you a bunch of examples and exercises, and provide you with an answer key. You will skip 90 percent of the exercises in the book, but having them around will save you a lot of time once we begin to learn grammar. If the book gives you "Englishy" pronunciation for each word (*Bonjour*: bawn-JURE, *Tschüss*: chewss), I give you permission to burn it and find a different one. Walking into a Parisian cafe and saying "bawn-JURE" is a good way to get ignored indefinitely by the waiter. If your new book comes with a CD, then so much the better.

There are two pitfalls here to avoid. First, avoid books systematically detailing every single solitary rule and detail and exception, all at once, in an uncontrollable torrent of grammatical despair. I used to love these books—until I tried learning from them. These are technical tomes that lay out the entire grammatical system of a language in giant flowcharts. They're lovely reference manuals but are very difficult to use in a step-by-step manner.

Second, be wary of most classroom books, especially those without an answer key. Books designed for classrooms are often sparse on explanations, because they expect that the teacher will be able to handle any confusion. You'll often have more luck with a self-study book.

A phrase book is a wonderful reference, as it's difficult to find handy phrases like "Am I under arrest?" and "Where are you taking me?" in a dictionary. Phrase books from the Lonely Planet company are cheap and come with a tiny, extremely practical dictionary in the back. We'll use *this* dictionary when we learn our first words, because it's a lot easier (and faster) to skim through than a real dictionary.

1. They'll do it, for the most part, in English. Yes, this breaks my no-English rule, but you know what they say about rules and breaking things.

We'll grudgingly allow "bawn-JURE" here but only because there are no phrase books without it.

CONSIDER THESE

A **frequency dictionary** typically contains the most important five thousand words of your target language, arranged in order of frequency. (The number one word in English, *the*, shows up once every twenty-five words.) These books are amazing, with lovingly picked examples and translations. They'll save you *tons* of time and they take so much work to compile that we should be throwing money and flowers at the feet of their authors. There are some online frequency lists, but they're not as good as the paper versions. Frequency dictionaries don't exist in every language yet, but if your language has one, you win. Get it.

A **pronunciation guide** will walk you through the entire pronunciation system of your language, with the help of recordings and diagrams of your mouth and tongue. For many languages, you can find guidebooks with CDs devoted entirely to pronunciation. They're *wonderful* resources and well worth the purchase. In addition, I've made it my personal mission to develop computerized pronunciation trainers in as many languages as I can. These trainers can do a few neat things that textbooks can't, and we'll discuss them in depth in Chapter 3. You won't be able to find a guidebook or trainer in *every* language, but when they exist, they're extraordinarily helpful.

You also want to find two dictionaries. It is up to you whether you find them online or in print. The first is a traditional **bilingual dictionary** (e.g., English-French/French-English), with accurate pronunciation listed for every word. Again, if you see "bawn-JURE," burn it. If you see funny symbols (e.g., [bɔ̃.ʒur]), keep it. We'll make friends with the International Phonetic Alphabet in Chapter 3. The second is a **monolingual dictionary** (e.g., French-French), which has actual *definitions* (e.g., in French) rather than translations. You'll

never see “bawn-JURE” in one of these, so don’t worry about finding your lighter.

You may also want a **thematic vocabulary book**. These books arrange the words in your language by theme: words about cars, words for food, medical words, and so on. They’re handy for customizing your vocabulary (we’ll talk about them in detail in Chapter 6).

FOR THE INTERMEDIATES

If you’ve already spent some time studying your target language, adjust your shopping list as follows:

First, if you already have a grammar book, make sure that you actually *like* it and that it’s sufficiently challenging. If not, get a new one that fits your level.

Second, if you don’t have a phrase book, they’re worth having. Even if you’re already reading books in your target language, you might not know how to ask about business hours or rental car insurance. A phrase book will let you look up sentences for many day-to-day situations that don’t show up in books.

Third, you probably don’t have a frequency dictionary yet, and you’ll use it much earlier than a beginner. Go get one.

Last, hold off on a pronunciation book or trainer until the end of Chapter 3. You’ll have a better idea then as to whether you’ll need one.

THE INTERNET

The Internet is filling up with free grammar guides, pronunciation guides, frequency lists, and dictionaries of all shapes and sizes. The quality varies drastically from site to site and changes daily. You *can* learn a language for free on the net, but you’ll be able to do it faster if you combine the best Internet resources with well-written books. I list my favorite Internet resources on my website (*Fluent-Forever.com/language-resources*), and we’ll be discussing the most important

websites—Google Images and the new language exchange communities (e.g., Lang-8, italki, Verbling)—throughout this book.

TUTORS AND PROGRAMS

If you need faster results and have some funds to spare, you can speed up your learning with private tutors (who are *extremely* affordable at *italki.com*) or intensive programs at home and abroad. The fastest route to fluency is also the least convenient: intensive immersion programs will provide twenty-plus weekly hours of class time, ten to twenty weekly hours of homework, and a strict no-English policy. You'll leave with a comfortable proficiency in your language of choice in exchange for two months of your life and a wad of cash. Some of them have generous financial aid policies if you apply early enough, so they may be within your reach if you lack the funds but have the time.

LANGUAGE CLASSES

In this book, we're going to discuss the process of learning a language on your own, outside of the classroom. But if you're already enrolled in a class (or if there are some good affordable classes offered nearby), then be sure to check out Appendix 6: How to Use This Book with Your Classroom Language Course.

The Path Forward

In the coming pages, we will knock down language's challenges one by one. I'll introduce you to a memorization system that will allow you to remember thousands of facts effortlessly and permanently. Then we'll determine which facts to learn. I'll guide you step-by-step through your language's sounds, words, and grammar. Every step of the way, we'll use your memorization system to learn more rapidly. Finally,

we'll develop your listening and reading comprehension, as we pave a path toward fluent speech.

Along the way, I'll show you all my favorite toys. I like finding ways to make life more efficient, even when *finding* a faster way to do something takes more time than simply doing it. Someday the month I spent memorizing a hundred composers' birth dates and death dates will pay off in time savings, but it hasn't quite yet.² When it comes to efficiency in language learning, I got lucky. I needed to learn four languages to fluency for my singing. Beyond these, I want to learn Yiddish, Hebrew, and Hungarian to speak with my relatives, and I'm *fascinated* by Japanese. With so many languages to learn, I could spend an *enormous* amount of time looking for efficiency and still justify the time expense. As a result, I have a chest full of neat tools and toys to play with. We'll begin with my favorite one: the Spaced Repetition System (SRS).

2. But every time I type out a recital program and don't have to look up a composer's dates (Johann Strauss Jr., 1825–1899!), I win back a little more time.