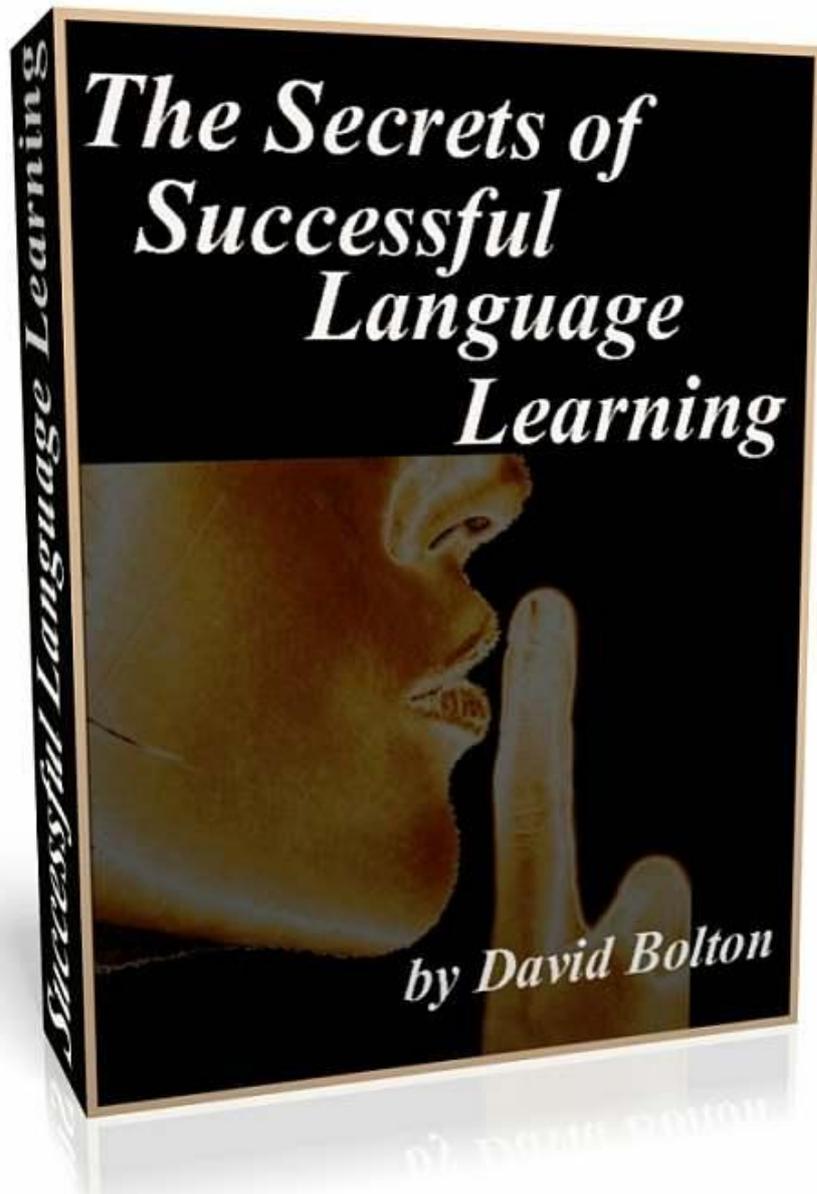


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Note to those who have already read the first edition of this Guide: The new chapters that have been inserted into this second edition can be found starting at Chapter 20.

The Secrets of Successful Language Learning

by

David Bolton

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David Bolton

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So you want to learn a language....

The world seems to be shrinking at an ever-increasing pace. More people travel abroad than ever before, visiting countries whose languages remain mysterious for any who haven't taken the time to learn their fundamentals. Thanks to the Internet, we can find and cultivate new friendships with people from practically any land. Even in your own county, you have probably noticed an increase in the number of immigrants who speak a language different from your own.

Many of us would like to learn at least one language other than our mother tongue, yet all-too-often, our educational institutions don't seem to be able to do the job of helping us reach true fluency in a second language. In addition, many non-native speakers of English - perhaps you who are reading these lines - have achieved a certain degree of proficiency in their English studies, but just can't seem to become totally fluent.

No matter which language you have chosen to learn, you've no doubt often asked yourself the question:

"What can I do to learn faster, to acquire correct pronunciation, a good-sized vocabulary, sufficient grammar, and above all, to learn to really *talk* in the language I'm learning?"

Hi, I'm David Bolton, of www.language-learning-tips.com. For over thirty years now, I have been helping people learn English, and have seen the difficulties that they face. There are the same problems that I myself had to solve when I learned German and Spanish. Let's face it: learning to speak another language is no easy task. The good news, however, is that by using a sound strategy, almost anyone can indeed learn a foreign language well, and can even have a surprising amount of fun doing so!

The purpose of this guide is to help you to successfully overcome the many-faceted obstacles that you will meet along the way. Don't expect a lot of "theory" here: all of the advice I give is highly practical, and has been tested on the hundreds of pupils I've had over the years - and of course, also on myself.

The knowledge you will gain from this book will not guarantee that you will master a second language; knowledge isn't the key, but rather, the **use** of that knowledge. Yet I can assure you that if you follow the advice given here, the road to mastery of another language will be shorter, and almost certainly more pleasant!

Sincerely,



P.S: I welcome feedback. You can contact me at: dbolton99b@yahoo.es

Table of Contents

- 1) [Envision your goal, plan your strategy, and go for it!](#)
- 2) [How to form positive habits that will help you reach your goals](#)
- 3) [Memory Techniques: How to learn faster, and remember better](#)
- 4) [Divide and Conquer - Mastery through piece-work](#)
- 5) [Be a parrot - don't think, talk!](#)
- 6) [And if you still can't get it right, try this!](#)
- 7) [Don't settle for less than excellence](#)
- 8) [Annihilate your ego - learn a new language!](#)
- 9) [Listening and understanding: how *not* to get frustrated](#)
- 10) [The Absolute Best Way to learn a language quickly](#)
- 11) [Practicing correct pronunciation on your own](#)
- 12) [The world through rose-colored glasses - visit another country!](#)
- 13) [Inertia - how it can help you... or ruin you](#)
- 14) [Mastering your new language: "Automating" your thinking](#)
- 15) [Communicate faster when speaking: Learn to simplify](#)
- 16) [Heinrich Schliemann's method of language learning](#)
- 17) [The musician's advantage: More than just "good hearing"](#)
- 18) [Should we learn a foreign language as children do?](#)
- 19) [How long will I need to learn a foreign language?](#)
- 20) [Word Order](#)
- 21) [Those Frustrating Phrasal Verbs!](#)
- 22) [Author's Bio](#)

Note: At the beginning of each chapter, you will see the symbol  . Clicking on it will return you to this Table of Contents.

Chapter 1

Envision your goal, plan your strategy... and go for it!

There was a man in Japan of about 60 years of age, who for many years had not engaged in much physical activity. Not only couldn't he bend over and touch his toes, he could just barely reach down to his knees. He decided that he was going to gain the flexibility that had been lost since his youth, without putting undue stress on his body. He put together a stack of paper, thousands of sheets, that reached up to his knees. Then, he bent over and touched the top of the stack with his fingertips, holding the position for a little while, which wasn't at all hard to do. The next day, he removed two sheets from the stack, and did the same thing.

Yes, you guessed it: every day from then on, he removed two more sheets of paper from the stack. The difference from one day to the next was so slight as to be practically imperceptible, so he never had any problem bending over, touching the top sheet, and holding the position for a minute or two. Of course, after many months of doing this, the stack was considerably lower, until eventually, there was no paper at all left, and he could easily touch his toes. He had achieved his goal, with no strain, no pain, and no stress on his system. All it took was patience and perseverance.

Now perhaps you have no problem touching your toes, or if you can't, maybe this doesn't bother you in the least. But I'll bet there is *something* you would like to achieve - for example, learning a foreign language - and haven't yet. So why not apply the same principles that the Japanese gentleman used?

- Set yourself a clear goal
- Develop a plan to go about reaching it.
- Do a little something every single day that will move you a step further towards your goal.

To get by in a language in most situations, you need a vocabulary of about a thousand words. That sounds like a big number, doesn't it? Well, what about three words? It can't be so hard to learn a mere three words, can it? Why, you could easily do that in a few minutes, couldn't you?

And if you learn three words today, another three tomorrow, and so on, in a year you will have acquired a vocabulary of almost 1,100 words, without stress or undue pressure. This approach is so simple that it doesn't take a genius to figure it out. Countless people have no doubt thought of it before. The question is, then, why don't so many people actually *do* it? The answer, of course, is that they do not persist. Let's put it more plainly: they lack discipline.

Discipline is a word that doesn't ring too pleasantly in the ears of many. Perhaps it reminds you of the military, or of an overly-strict parent. The truth is, most people tend to want to avoid doing those things that they know they "should" do. The majority of children find it easy to sit down and watch TV for an hour, or two, or even more. But if their father told them they *must* sit there for

three hours, watching television without a break, no doubt many of them would rebel, and try to sneak away at the first opportunity they got!

As soon as something fun becomes an *obligation*, the fun evaporates almost at once, and the activity can soon turn to drudgery. As everyone knows, it isn't always possible to escape from our "duties", and when we do, we often feel guilty about it. Thus it would seem reasonable to ask ourselves how we can transform this type of situation, so that we act with discipline, doing what we know we "ought to" do, with an absolute minimum of displeasure.

Let's assume that you have set a language-related goal. You want to expand your vocabulary in a foreign language by 1,000 words within a year. You know this means learning only three words a day, a prospect that certainly wouldn't terrify anyone. Sure, you'll have to spend some time each week reviewing the words previously learned, but since your daily "quota" is only three words, you should readily be able to find the time to review several others within a day's session. The big question is now simply "But will I *really* get around to learning three words every single day?"

The technique I am going to suggest to you will almost surely allow you to answer that question with a **YES**. And it's quite simple, maybe even deceptively so. Let me tell you how I've been implementing it in my life.

One of the necessary daily routines for a musician is practice. Being a musician as well as a language teacher, I *love* music, and I usually enjoy sitting down at the harpsichord and studying new works, or polishing up ones I have learned before. But let me assure you that there are days when I don't have the least desire to play anything. After all, there are so many other things to do in life! This isn't a problem if it's only a matter of not practicing a day or two. But the danger is always that you may simply lose the habit of regular practice: days turn into weeks, weeks into months, your instrumental technique goes downhill; you forget works you used to know rather well ... you get the picture.

Another thing that I determined many years ago to do regularly was run. Back in my school days, I was one of the worst runners in the class. I had suffered from asthma and bronchitis as a child, and my lungs had always been weak. When I was in my early thirties, I told myself that that situation had to change. I knew I would never be a really good runner, but at least I should be able to run a couple of miles without collapsing after the first three blocks!

Of course, if it isn't always a pleasure to play your favorite instrument, *running* can be said to be a real torture by comparison. Yet for over 20 years now, I have been running religiously every two days, all year, rain or shine (health permitting).

Where did I get the discipline? By using that simple technique I mentioned earlier and which I will now reveal...

I have a notebook in which I always write down the time I spend practicing every day, and also the times I go running.

Maybe you're disappointed, since you may have been expecting some quasi-metaphysical, earth-shaking revelation. But don't let the simplicity of this habit fool you:

By taking note of a certain regular activity, you will soon constantly be aware of whether or not you've done what you wanted to do that day. If I *don't* practice on a certain day, I still list that day's date, and fill in a big ZERO next to it. Doing so is, to be sure, frustrating, but that's the effect I want: if I get somewhat frustrated because I was lazy that day, it's all the more likely that I will **not** be lazy the next day!

When I do practice, I write down how long I did so. For example, if I practice an hour in the morning, and another hour and five minutes in the afternoon, I'll note: "60 + 65 = 125 minutes". (I like to be precise). True, it really doesn't matter much whether I practice two hours and five minutes, or just an even two hours, but by writing down *exactly* how much time I spend practicing, it's easier to note trends: for example when, during the course of a week or so, my rehearsal time slowly declines. Seeing this in writing gives me the motivation to put in some more time over the next few days to "make up for the loss".

On my "Running" page, I'll note the date, the total time I ran, along with other data such as the route I took, and my heart rate upon finishing. Thus, this list not only motivates me to continue running, but also shows me whether my physical condition is improving.

Compared to practicing an instrument for a few hours, or running a few miles, the goal of learning three new words a day should seem like child's play - and it is! But your daily list will make sure you **never** skip a day - and if you do, looking at that blank entry in your list on the following day will motivate you to learn six new words instead of three, to make up for lost time.

Your list could be as simple as this:

Nov 1 X

Nov 2 X

Nov 3 X... etc., with each "X" meaning that you learned your three words for the day. But why not write down the three words themselves in this list (I'll assume you're learning Spanish)?

Nov 1 el perro=dog; el gato=cat; trabajar= to work

Nov 2 hacer= to do; bajo= low; alto = high

Nov 3 la cara= face; tonto= silly; el edificio= building

Nov 4 ----- oops! I visited Great Aunt Maude today, and just didn't get around to learning any new words! But just wait till tomorrow...

Nov 5 La mesa= table; La silla=chair; el suelo= floor; volar=to fly;

el bolígrafo= pen; el lápiz=pencil; el papel=paper; la lámpara=lamp

There! I did **seven** today!

The power of such a notebook is not to be underestimated. There are many things I like to do: read about any number of subjects, work on various computer/Internet-related projects, do astrological research, and so on. But the two things I almost never fail to *consistently* do on a regular basis are - that's right, practice the harpsichord, and run. Precisely those two activities that I also never fail to take note of. Hmm... I think I'll start a notebook for some other activities as well...

After you have been adding to your list for a few months, it will soon be growing automatically, since you will be learning those words *every day* without even thinking about it too much. But until then - that is, until your daily word-learning routine has become a **habit** - you'll have to be on the lookout for any sort of distraction that threatens to make you forget to learn the words of the day.

Are you determined to start towards your goal of a thousand new words? Then **go get a notebook now**, or if you don't have one at hand, a piece of paper will do (you can always copy the first few days' results into the notebook when you get one). The idea is to *start now*, lest you simply decide to "put it off" till another day... all-too often, that "other day" never arrives, and we haven't progressed at all!

May I assume you have learned your words for the day, and have duly taken note of this first step? Fine! So now we can move on to our next, oh-so-crucial subject. But first...

Chapter 2

How to form positive habits that will help you reach your goals

If you've already read the previous section, "Envision your goal, plan your strategy... and go for it!", you now know one way to form a positive habit: by *writing down*, on a daily basis, that which you've done on that day, and making it a point to look at this list every day, in order to make sure you continue doing what you've set out to do, as well as to track your progress.

But there will be times when you're tempted on occasion to *not* learn your daily words. You'll hear yourself thinking up all kinds of excuses: "I'm so tired now, I couldn't learn anything anyway"; "I can do it later, maybe before going to bed"; "I really have better things to do right now", or whatever else you can come up with.

We often have the tendency to make up reasons to not do what we know we should do; this is "only human", you might say. I know in my case, when it's really cold outside, and maybe even raining as well, I do *not* generally feel like going out to run, and if I stop to think about it for a minute, I'll no doubt be able to devise at least 10 good reasons why I should stay indoors and do something else. The solution to this problem? Well, it lies within the previous sentence: "if I stop to think about it for a minute".

Do you want to make *sure* that you do what you planned to do each day? Then when the time comes, **don't stop to think about it**. Or, as Nike puts it quite aptly, **just do it!**

The value of this slogan cannot be overestimated. You have *decided* you want to do something - for example, learn three new words a day. You *know* you can do this in a short time, almost effortlessly, *once you start*. If you plan to learn those words at a certain time of day, then when that time comes, get out your word list, select three new ones, and **learn** them. No thinking about it first. No asking yourself whether it wouldn't be better to do it later. No procrastination of any sort. **Just do it.**

Of course, you may well hear a little voice within yourself thinking up excuses. Let it talk, but while it does, begin to take action, get out your word list, and start to learn. Don't pay any attention to what the little voice is saying. Treat it as you would someone who habitually nags at you: don't try to think up counter-arguments, just **do** what you know you must. And when you do, the little voice will disappear, for it'll know that **your will** has won the game!

When you first start learning the foreign language of your choice methodically on a daily basis, you will often be in danger of listening to that dissenting voice within, and may be tempted to take its arguments seriously. In this phase, as I've already said, simply **ACT** before you have time to decide not to. But after a couple of months or so, you'll discover that once your habit has been formed, that little voice may well continue chatting away, but the effect it has on you is different: you'll find that the more it tries to dissuade you, the **firmer** your will becomes, and the more

decided you are to get your task accomplished. When you notice this happening, you can be sure that you have turned your learning routine into a positive habit, and it becomes less and less likely that you will give it up.

At some point while reading the last couple of pages, you may have thought that all this talk about determination, willpower, and so on is somewhat exaggerated. How much willpower does it take to learn three words a day? That's a cinch! No need to worry about forming habits, acquiring discipline... Ah, but here, I would disagree. You have made a decision to learn something *every* day, and even if it's just three words, doing it *every* day will occasionally be quite difficult indeed.

Decide when you want to start. Today, if possible, tomorrow, at the latest. Then...

- When you start, tell yourself you will do it every day.

- When the time comes to learn, **don't think** about whether you should or shouldn't, **simply**

begin to act: do it!

- Once you've learned your words, add the day's date (and the words you've learned) to your list in the notebook. *Then* do anything else you may have planned for that day.

Follow these steps on a daily basis, and before you know it, learning something every day will have become a positive habit. Now nothing can stop you from mastering your favorite foreign language!

Chapter 3

Memory Techniques: How to learn faster, and remember better

I have been a musician for many years now, and my experiences in that area have often helped me in the field of language teaching. It often happens to me that I will be walking down the street, and a piece of music is constantly going through my mind, on a semi-conscious level. When I then think consciously about it, I realize that the piece in my mind was the one I had been rehearsing several hours before. When you practice an instrument, your session doesn't really stop when you get up and leave the instrument; rather, your mind continues to "work" on the piece throughout the day. Usually, it's the *last* piece you work on that sticks in your mind the most.

The same thing happens with foreign languages. When we learn, for instance, a list of ten vocabulary words in a foreign language, we can expect to think about them again during the day, though we may not be fully conscious of this.

However, there are two major differences between a vocabulary list and music:

1) A vocabulary list consists of words, of course. After learning the list, we will probably talk to someone, watch TV, or simply think. All of these are activities that involve words - and most likely, the words in our foreign-language vocabulary list will not be heard, spoken or thought during the course of our normal daily activities. As a result, the "sub/semi"-conscious learning effect will usually not be as great as in the case of music, since....

2) Music is a much more *emotional* expression than are mere word lists. We *move* to music, we *feel* when we hear it, it *inspires*, *elates* and *touches* us directly on an emotional level. It is comforting, pleasant and pleasurable... usually much more so than a list of vocabulary words!

Nonetheless, it IS possible to apply this knowledge about the effect music has on us when learning words.

I remember when I had my first French class back when I was in college. The professor was an elderly European gentleman who had the liveliness of a Spaniard and the charm of a Frenchman (He had been born and raised in Spain, but had lived the greater part of his life in France).

One day, he was teaching possessive adjectives. Instead of simply reading us the list, he chanted it in a "sing-song" way, with the following rhythm:

("^" = short, -- = "long", --- = "very long")

mon	ton	son	notre	votre	leur
ma	ta	sa	notre	votre	leur
mes	tes	ses	nos	vos	leurs

I remember the looks on some of the students' faces when the old fellow started rattling this off, his hands keeping time during his little "recital": some thought he was half crazy!

But do you know what? Many years later, I could *still* remember *all* the forms of those possessive adjectives in French. If he had simply read us the list, I would have forgotten them by the next day. But the fact that he **acted out** that list, chanting them as if they were part of a nursery rhyme, helped to implant that list into my mind in a way that no simple reading could have. Now, over 30 years later, I still remember them whenever I think of that unorthodox, yet excellent teacher.

Such methods are infinitely more effective in helping you memorize lists than mere reading and repeating.

Of course, it may be difficult to apply such a method when learning large numbers of vocabulary words. After all, if we chant every list we have, they will soon become confused in our minds, and this would defeat our purpose. However, the main principle can still be applied, that being, that **if we add emotion and imagery to the material to be learned, we will remember it much better.**

Here are a few tips:

If you must learn a small list of grammatical forms - such as the possessive adjectives above - chanting them rhythmically is a great way to help you implant them into your memory.

Where new vocabulary is concerned, I recommend the following:

1) When you first read the words, **say them aloud**. That way, your mind will not only receive the impression of the printed word on the page, but the **sound** of that word as well, and it will thus be easier to recall later.

2) **Combine and Conquer**. Never learn lists of words by simply reading them over and over again. Instead, *combine* groups of words to make sentences. Here's an example, using a list of Spanish words.

el escritorio = the desk

el suelo = the floor

la chica = the girl

delgado/a slender

la caja = the box

caerse = to fall

coger = to get, pick up

Let's make a sentence:

Cuando la caja se cae del escritorio al suelo, la chica delgada la coge.

When the box falls from the desk to the floor, the slender girl picks it up.

Seven new words are in that a single sentence. Now, learn this sentence by memory in Spanish, imagining the situation it describes as vividly as you can: A box on the desks falls to the floor, and a slim girl picks it up.

(Of course, for the two verbs, you would have to know - or look up - the correct forms in order to make such a sentence yourself.)

The fact that the new words appear in a **context** will be of great help in remembering the individual words. Weeks later, perhaps you'll see the word "delgado", and won't remember what it means. But you *might* remember the "chica delgada" that was picking up the box...and when you do, you'll most likely recall the meaning of "delgado", when you think of that slender girl with the box.

Of course, sometimes we will have to learn lists of words that don't combine as easily. "basura" (= trash), "filósofo" (philosopher) and "gotear" (= drip) for instance. Combine them anyway to form a sentence: you'll soon see that the more ridiculous the sentence turns out, the **better** you'll remember the words in it:

"La basura está goteando encima del filósofo"

"The trash is dripping onto the philosopher".

Certainly not a very practical sentence, but the unusual image evoked will assure that you don't forget those words easily!

It's better to keep such sentences simple at first, and not try to fill them with more complicated grammatical structures. You should be able to include 3 to 5 new words in a sentence, maybe even more. Once you write the sentence, memorize it, imagining vividly the "picture" it conveys. Then form another one, using more new words.

You'll want to go over these sentences a few days later, then maybe again in a couple of weeks - after all, as the ancient Greeks said: "**Repetition is the mother of learning**". And learning your vocabulary words in such a way will not only make them easier to remember, but more fun to learn as well.

Before we continue with the next chapter, allow me to give you a couple pages of shameless publicity for a new product of mine - it's worth reading if English is not your native language and you've been having problems learning the phrasal verbs, or if you teach English to foreigners.

Chapter 4

Divide and Conquer

Learning a language can, on one level, be compared to putting together a rather large jigsaw puzzle. Imagine that somebody gives you a puzzle that shows a panoramic view of the Grand Canyon - that is, if you ever manage to put all the pieces together. For there are several thousands of them, and many look aggravatingly similar. So how do you do it? Little by little, with patience and perseverance. You know you can't do it in a day, maybe not even in a week or a month, but if you do something on a regular basis, connecting just a few pieces daily, you *know* you'll finish sooner or later.

Admittedly, the analogy isn't perfect. After all, the puzzle does have a limited number of pieces, and depending on how many there are altogether, you can calculate exactly how many days it'll take you to finish if you manage to put together, say, 3 pieces a day. A language, on the other hand, is constantly growing, developing, changing, evolving... Nobody in the world knows everything there is to know about his or her native tongue, let alone a foreign language.

But then, when you set out to learn a new language, your goal isn't to know everything about it (since you are aware that that isn't possible). It is instead to **master a vocabulary** consisting of the most commonly used words, to **learn to use the grammar** correctly, and, in the end, **to be able to understand and to make yourself understood** in that language. This is an aim that can indeed be divided up into a few thousand parts.

Working with a list of the 1500 most frequently encountered words in your target language, as well as a good grammar book, you might theoretically be able to determine, for instance, 2500 "elements" that are to be learned: the 1500 vocabulary words, plus 1 thousand grammatical units. (One grammatical unit being, for example, the present tense of the verb "to be" in your target language; another one being the past tense, yet another could be a rule concerning word order, etc.)

Now, if you learn 5 parts of this "puzzle" every single day, you know you will have achieved your goal in 500 days, or about a year and a half (2500 "elements" divided by 5 = 500). That's not really so long, is it? Sure, you'll have to review material already learned, but if your daily "quota" of new elements isn't too large, you'll easily have enough time left over for review.

Working in such a way not only *guarantees progress*, but just as importantly, it serves to all but completely eliminate one of the most formidable obstacles to learning any subject of wide scope: the frustration you can feel when you think about *all* the things you'll have to learn in order to reach your goal.

When you first begin to learn a language, it can seem a bit overwhelming. Learning how to say "Buenos días", or "Wie geht es Ihnen?" isn't so bad, but as soon as you want to express just about anything else, you realize that you don't know how to do so. Even after a couple of months, you still

might have trouble speaking in tenses other than the present, and this severely limits your ability to communicate with others. It's as if you were climbing a mountain: if you look down, you may be delighted to see that you have already climbed the first few hundred meters, but when you look up, the peak may still be very far away!

By "dividing and conquering" - learning just a few little "pieces" at a time, but on a consistent and regular basis, you will reach your goal, with an absolute minimum of frustration.

For your daily goal will not be "to be able to speak this *+!#* language NOW!", but rather, to simply learn a few elements, and then do the same thing tomorrow, the next day, and so on.

Patience, discipline, perseverance... and before you know it, you will find that you can handle yourself quite well in your new language, without ever having felt that your head was going to explode!

A piece of practical advice: when you are learning a language, be sure you have a book that fulfills these requirements:

1) It should teach the grammar in a clear, orderly fashion, concentrating on the most important grammatical features, without dwelling on useless information. By "useless", I mean elements of grammar that are antiquated, extremely rare, etc. Once you have reached an advanced level, you can always buy another book that goes into such details. But in the beginning, you should concentrate on *useful* grammar, with the goal of **mastering** it.

2) It doesn't give you a vocabulary of thousands of words. During my years of teaching English in Spain, I have often seen books used for teaching English to Spanish high-school students that contained words that even I have seldom, if ever, used. This is senseless. Get yourself a list of the 1000 most common words (preferably ordered according to frequency) in your target language, and use this as a basis for vocabulary. In your grammar book, concentrate on memorizing the useful vocabulary; if you see a word that you would seldom ever need, don't bother with it, unless you're feeling ambitious!

3) It contains exercises as well as an answer key in the back. There's nothing more frustrating than to do grammar exercises, and then to have no way to check your answers. Of course, if you are working with a teacher, he/she can correct your mistakes. Nonetheless, since you'll no doubt be learning alone a lot, it is a comfort to know that when you are finished the exercises, you can immediately see if and where you went wrong.

Of course, languages cannot be learned with books alone: you will also have to **LISTEN** and **SPEAK**. For this purpose, besides learning vocabulary and grammar, you must learn good pronunciation, so that you will understand others when they speak, and so that you yourself will be understood. This takes us to our next subject...

Chapter 5

Be a parrot - don't think, talk!



I have taught English to hundreds of foreigners - mostly Germans and Spaniards, but also French, Russian, Polish, Czech, Italian, Brazilian, Japanese, Chinese, Arabs... the list goes on. My pupils are usually advanced when they begin lessons with me, in that they can carry on a conversation in English - which doesn't mean that I can always understand what they're saying!

Take the Spanish, for example. Do you know what "go - at" means? When a Spanish girl said this once, I almost corrected her, since I thought she meant "go to", such as "go to church", or whatever. But then I realized she was trying to say "goat". Where in the world would she get the idea that the word "goat" is pronounced as two syllables, "go" plus "at"? Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? She was trying to pronounce the word "goat" as if it were a Spanish word, not an English one. Apparently, years ago, when her high school teacher first taught that word, this girl either wasn't in class, or wasn't paying attention (or the teacher herself pronounced it incorrectly, something that occurs all-too frequently in Spanish public schools).

Thus we see the first source of problems as far as pronunciation is concerned: using the rules of pronunciation of your *own* language to try to pronounce a *foreign* word. This will only rarely turn out well! I once saw a quotation (whose author I unfortunately do not remember) that put it quite clearly:

"Language cannot be separated from sound, and that is the heart of the matter."

When you learn new words, you will ideally first encounter them aurally, that is, *hearing* them. Learn to recognize them first by their **sound**, and then to say them correctly. After that, you can deal with how they are written.

Of course, I know that this is often not practically possible. You learn vocabulary from a list (one of those lists containing the 1000 to 2000 most frequent words in the language), and are thus forced to try to read them *before* you hear them. Not very natural, is it? After all, when you took your first steps in your own language way back in early childhood, you *heard* your mother talking, and tried to imitate her. You certainly did *not* begin by picking up a book and trying to *read* your first words, did you?

If you have access to a native speaker of your target language (and perhaps already have lessons with that person), I think a good investment would be to pay him or her to record, word for word, *all* the words in your basic vocabulary list, speaking *slowly* and *clearly*, of course, perhaps leaving a few seconds between the words, so that when you listen, you can *repeat* the word you've just heard. Then, you can *listen* to that recording again and again. True, it might take the person a

few hours to record a list of a couple of thousand words, but maybe you and a few friends can chip in to pay him/her for the effort, and then you can make copies of the recording for each of you. When listening to the recording, you can simultaneously *look* at the list. This way, you are learning the sound of the words along with their correct spelling. When you yourself say each word, **BE A PARROT!**

Consider parrots. Some of them know quite a few words. How did they learn them? Certainly not by reading. They learned simply by hearing and repeating. No thinking was necessary. When you repeat the words your teacher says, you should strive to be a parrot as well. Don't *analyze* (for example, don't ask yourself: "Let's see, was that sound the teacher said like *this*, or like *that*...?")

Simply try to absorb the sound and repeat it as closely as possible.

By not thinking, you will be able to avoid censoring what you yourself say, which can lead to mental blocks. For instance, some pupils, when they hear a word in a foreign tongue, hesitate before trying to say it themselves. They first want to think about how it is written, how to form the mouth when pronouncing it, etc. Yet the best thing to do at first is *just say it*. Your pronunciation wasn't on the mark? Fine. **Then say it again - and again, and again...** Keep repeating it until what you say sounds like what the teacher said. Insist that your teacher not be satisfied until you say it right. Usually, you will get it after a few tries at most. If not, **then** is the time to analyze. *Now*, you can think. Ask yourself what you are doing wrong. Are you positioning your lips and tongue correctly? Could it be that you didn't listen well in the first place, so that you aren't really sure *how* the word sounds yet? Have the teacher say it again (or rewind your recording a bit). **Listen more closely.** Then try to say it again. In any case, **don't be satisfied until you are able to pronounce the word as closely to the native speaker's pronunciation as possible.**

If your mind seems "blocked", that is, if you can't seem to get it right no matter what you try, then it's time to take a step back. *Don't* tell yourself you just *can't* get it right, that you are a failure, or whatever. Even if you're learning a foreign language as difficult as Chinese, always remember: There are *millions* of people who speak that language, and they certainly aren't all geniuses! It **can** be done.

When it isn't going well, the first thing you should do is **RELAX**. Seriously: **Sit back in your chair, breathe deeply.** Inhale, exhale, slowly. Feel your body relaxing, your mind opening up. Tell yourself that you will now listen to the word again, in this relaxed state, and that you will then be able to say it yourself. Listen again, and repeat. I have seen countless times that when a pupil relaxes, he or she can suddenly listen much better, and is thus better able to repeat what is heard. Try it out when the going gets rough, and more likely than not, you'll surprise yourself at how much easier it is when you are relaxed.

Relax, listen, absorb the sound, and repeat, as if you were a parrot.

It's the best way there is to learn good pronunciation. And if you still can't get it right, don't despair! Just read the next section for more advice.

Chapter 6

And if you still can't get it right...

I can truthfully say that I have practically never had a pupil who, when faced with having to pronounce a particularly difficult word, was not able to do so after a couple of minutes at most (I can remember only one case where I had to practice a word with a student for a full seven minutes before she was able to pronounce it correctly). In every case, I was able to help them achieve a good pronunciation, no matter how tricky the word was. No brag, just fact. Not that I am a miracle worker. You, too, could do this, if you approach it the right way.

In the last section, we saw how "being a parrot" is a great method for learning how to pronounce a word in a foreign language. Nonetheless, there will be times when this doesn't work: no matter how well the pupil listens, and no matter how often he/she repeats the word, sometimes it still doesn't quite come out right. These cases are rare, but they do occur. What should you do when a pupil you are teaching - or you yourself - are faced with such a problem?

Well, if the "relax, listen, and repeat" method doesn't work, it's time to approach the situation from another angle: that of careful analysis. Ask your teacher to say the word slowly. Now ask yourself exactly what sound that word has that you cannot pronounce. For example, the Spanish word "correos" (post office). You most probably don't have any problem with the "co-" or "-eos" part - it's that long rolled "rr" that is most likely the culprit. So concentrate only on that sound (rr), and forget the other sounds in that word for a moment (the "divide and conquer" principle).

Ask your teacher to give a description of just how the mouth (lips, tongue, etc.) should be formed in order to pronounce the "rr" correctly. (A good teacher will indeed be able to describe this, though he may have to think about it himself for a minute first: after all, he has been saying it correctly since childhood, and may not be immediately conscious of just *why* this sound is so difficult for someone like you.)

Note how far open his mouth is when he says it. A long, rolled "rr" is extremely difficult to say if the mouth is open too far; try bringing your teeth together a bit more and try it again. Also, the tongue must be relaxed; if it is too tense, the sound won't come out right. Try to adjust the position of your lips, mouth and tongue just as your teacher does, then try a few more times. Still doesn't work?

Then go back to "being a parrot". Ask your teacher to repeat the word "correos" five times in succession, slowly. While he does, sit back in your chair, *relax*, breathe deeply, listen and "absorb" the sounds you hear. While listening, don't tell yourself you can't do it, or that it is difficult. Simply **LISTEN** and **ABSORB** what you hear, and then, after he has said it five times, **you** say it. You might surprise yourself by saying it perfectly this time! This method often works like a charm.

Nonetheless, if you *still* can't say it, go back to observation and analysis, to be absolutely sure that you are forming the parts of your mouth correctly. If, despite all these efforts, you still can't say "correos" correctly, forget it - at least for today.

You see, when we try *too* hard to get something right, it can happen that our minds simply block, at which point further effort is often futile. It is then better to stop, and try again the next day, or even better, two or three days later. Why? Because during that 2-3 day interval, even though you are not consciously attempting to "conquer" that sound, your subconscious is indeed working on it. (More about this in the next section)

In well over 90% of the cases, you will be able to pronounce a foreign word well without having to postpone your efforts to another day. Using the two-pronged approach already described, you will be able to successfully tackle almost any pronunciation difficulty with success. Keep this in mind, and try it out the next time you encounter a word you can't say correctly:

- 1) Sit back, relax, listen, absorb the sound (don't think, just listen!), then say it yourself. Do this a few times, until you get it right.
- 2) If that doesn't work, then it's time to think: analyze how the problematic sound is formed in the mouth (concentrating only on that syllable of the word) by having your teacher say it. Then form your mouth the same way, and try, try again.
- 3) No success yet? Return to 1) and try that again.
- 4) Still doesn't work? **Forget it** for two or three days, then make another attempt. In many cases, after a few days, you will automatically be able to say the sound that so frustratingly eluded you before.

As a matter of fact, that's exactly what happened to me with the "rr" sound when I began to learn Spanish. Try as I might, I simply couldn't say it. Yet a few days later, I tried again, and I could say it almost at once! This was a sure sign that my subconscious was working on the problem during the several-day interval.

As always, with **patience, discipline and perseverance**, you will be able to solve the problem and achieve your goal.

Chapter 7

Don't settle for less than excellence

To communicate with others in a foreign language doesn't really require perfection. Even if you speak Spanish, for example, with a heavy North American accent, can only use the simple present form of the verbs, and mix up the word order in practically every sentence you utter, many people will still be able to understand you. But be honest: if you go to all the trouble of learning a new language, do you *really* want to end up speaking it horribly? Of course not!

Back in the '80's, I was co-owner of a music school in Germany. We usually hired young Americans who had studied piano in the U.S., had had at least a couple of years of college German, and who wanted to spend a year or two in Germany teaching music. When a new group of teachers arrived at the beginning of each summer, they knew a lot of German grammar, and a fair amount of vocabulary, but were practically unable to speak German at all. No matter. I gave them intensive classes during June, July and August, and by September **all** were prepared to start teaching in their new language.

During those years, I had the chance to make careful observations of the differences in the way people learn another language. Two of the teachers who began one year were a married couple, whose personalities were quite different (opposites attract, as they say). He was quiet, reserved, and intellectually inclined; she was extraverted, lively, and intelligent, without being especially analytical. After only a month or two, she was talking to everybody she met in German. She had learned quickly, since she had few inhibitions, and didn't care if the sentences she used were totally correct or not; the main thing was, for her, communication. He, on the other hand, took considerably longer to be able to speak as much as she could. But months later, when he finally could, his German was much better than hers. For he, being a perfectionist, first wanted to learn everything with great precision before using it extensively. As a result, his grammar was, in the end, correct, and his pronunciation very good. Although she had no trouble whatsoever communicating, her grammar remained faulty, and her pronunciation wasn't as good as it could have been.

This shows the value of taking the time to learn the basics well from the very beginning. When you don't learn the elementary elements of a language well from the start, it is *extremely* difficult to perfect your skills later.

If, however, you make sure to speak as perfectly as possible from the beginning (even if this means speaking very slowly), you will be building a much more solid foundation.

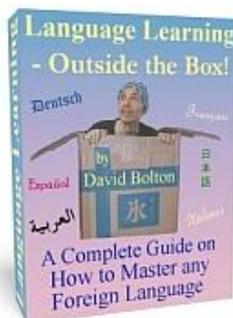
That's why I advise my pupils to **strive for excellence**. Don't settle for merely being able to form the simplest of sentences. Try instead to refine the thoughts you wish to express, and form your sentences accordingly. When speaking, attempt to say each word the way a native speaker would. Naturally, this won't be possible in every situation. If you are trying to explain something to

somebody, perhaps time won't permit you to take twice as long to say it, simply for the sake of an improved pronunciation. But whenever possible, do try to achieve precise pronunciation, at least when talking to friends (assuming that you have friends willing to be patient with you!)

Of course, this will be frustrating for you occasionally. When you want to say something in your target language, it is hard enough to come up with the right words, forming them into correct sentences, without having to concentrate on saying them perfectly as well. But believe me, this is worth the effort. The first few weeks may be exasperating, but after that, you will be used to using good pronunciation, and not long thereafter, it will have become second nature: you will be doing it automatically. As is so often the case, **patience, discipline and perseverance** will be your staunchest allies.

Even if you have achieved a decent pronunciation, I recommend that you make frequent use of a recording device to monitor your progress. Record yourself reading a text in your new language, for example, a page from a book. Read slowly, enunciating well. Then, when you listen to the recording, ask yourself if what you're hearing sounds like a native speaker. If not, ask yourself *why not*. Are there certain words that you didn't pronounce well enough? Or could it be that each word was pronounced well, yet the sentence didn't "flow" well enough? Or perhaps you stressed words that a native speaker would not have accented in such a way?

If your teacher is a native speaker, request that he/she read the page while you record. Then listen to this recording a few times until you get the "hang" of the way the sentences should be read. Next, record yourself reading the page again, imitating the way your teacher read it. This method is one of the best there is to ensure that your speaking skills will improve rapidly. **Strive for excellence**, using efficient methods such as this one, and it won't be long before you will be speaking your new language with confidence. And don't be surprised if, in the not-too-distant future, native speakers of that tongue occasionally ask you how you managed to learn their language so well!



**If you like what you've read so far, then you'll ♥ LOVE ♥
my new book: "Language Learning – Outside the Box!"**

It will put you firmly on the path to mastering any language you want.

Curious? Then [click here](#) to go have a look at it right now!

Chapter 8

Annihilate your ego - learn a new language!

If you have ever been to another country and have had to attempt to converse in a foreign language that you hadn't yet mastered, you will no doubt be able to identify with what I'm about to tell. If not, then read on anyway - so that you'll get an idea of what you're getting yourself into!

I assume that you're an intelligent, articulate individual, capable of expressing him/herself with precision, and perhaps even a bit of eloquence at times (or at the very least, that you know how to say what you're thinking.)

Before taking your first trip to a non-English-speaking country, you may well have spent a few years learning the language, most probably in a high school or college setting. The month before embarking on your journey, you might have worked more intensively on learning extra vocabulary, grammar, correct pronunciation, and the like. Now your plane is landing, and you are eager to put your knowledge to the test. After all, it can't be all that hard, can it?

Well, there is always one thing you should assume in such a case: it **is** going to be hard, very hard, as a matter of fact. It wouldn't be so difficult if everyone you met spoke just like they do on those language-learning CDs you have at home. But then go to the first supermarket you see in the foreign land, and try to buy some vegetables. Believe me: in all the countries I have visited, I have *never* met a vegetable sales person who spoke like the voice in a language lab! As a matter of fact, you'll be lucky if the sales person understands **you**, even if you speak the language relatively well. Since that person is used to dealing with his/her own countrymen, from *that* particular city, and from *that* particular section of the city, it might well be difficult for him/her to understand a foreigner speaking: they just aren't used to your accent. In the end, pointing to the vegetables you want will most likely be the best way to go about it (after all, what are fingers for, anyway?).

Of course, you will also be meeting people who speak their language in a more "standard" way. Take university students, for example. Naturally, even if they speak English rather well, you will not want to fall into that trap. You didn't come all the way to their country so that they can improve their English, did you? No, you want to practice *their* tongue. That's why you've invested so much cash in this trip. So when you make your first acquaintances, you will hopefully immediately start speaking their language, and insist, in a friendly, yet firm manner, that you prefer it that way.

It won't be long before the basics have been covered in your conversation: where you are from, when you arrived, how long you'll be staying in that country, whether you have a girl- (or boy-) friend, and the like. Even such simple areas are often more trying than expected when they must be dealt with in a language other than your own. But when it gets to somewhat more complicated issues, like "why the U.S. is always trying to meddle in the affairs of other nations" (yes, there are some foreigners who will say such things when they meet an American), or "why it is that there are

so many religious people in America" (Europeans tending to be, on average, more secular-minded)... Well, you may know just what you want to answer, but even if you do, you suddenly find that the words don't exactly flow from your mouth. You may not even be able to formulate the first sentence of your explanation. And for presumably the first time in many a year, you feel *stupid*, and truly frustrated besides.

You try to simplify your sentences (always a good way to at least communicate the gist of what you want to say), but you can't quite find the words to even do that. So you feel more stupid. Your conversation partner patiently smiles, though you can see in his eyes that he hasn't the faintest idea of what you want to express. And then he smiles a bit more, and you see - heavens, no! - a look of *pity* in his eyes. Now you *really* feel stupid.

Okay, don't panic - maybe the three beers you just drank clouded your mind a bit... or could it be that you need a couple more to loosen your tongue? How could this be? After all, you *are* intelligent, you just know it. Yet now, you feel as if your IQ had dropped about 30-40 points, for you just can't find the words to explain what you're thinking. And when all this inner confusion (allied with the effect of the beers) suddenly makes you forget what your new-found friend asked in the first place, your ego hits rock bottom, and breaks into several hundred pieces...

Take it from me: you *will* find yourself in such situations during the first month you spend in another country. It happens to everybody. What to do when it does? Here's some advice:

Grin and bear it. This is always a good idea when in an unpleasant situation that cannot be avoided. After all, you have come to the country to improve your language skills, and you *are* going to make mistakes. But what's the worst that could happen? Probably that you say something serious, but formulate it in such a way that it sounds, to the foreigner's ear, absolutely ridiculous. So ridiculous, that he bursts out laughing, as do his friends as well. Here, you have two quite opposite ways of reacting to the slight:

1) Punch the first guy who laughed in the face, and ask his friends if they want a bit of the same medicine. This course is not advisable. Besides the fact that you will have already lost the friends you made just a couple of hours before, you might well end up having your face pummeled to a jelly by the guy's friends, assisted by a few more of their countrymen who never did like Americans too much anyway. And even if you win the fight, you may end up in jail for assault and battery. Rule this option out!

2) Laugh along with them. Hey, I know it doesn't feel good to have people laugh at you, but look at it this way: laughter is excellent for the health, and by making them laugh, you are improving their health, and giving them a psychological boost as well. They always *knew* that they, as Europeans, were "smarter" than Americans, and you just proved it to them... so let the babies have their bottle. Let 'em laugh, and show that you can take a joke, even if it's at your own expense.

Of course, meanwhile, you will be thinking of your "prime directive", the reason why you are there in the first place - **to learn their language**.

Whenever you are in a situation similar to this one, and frustration threatens to overwhelm you, remind yourself that the **only** really important thing is that **you are there to learn a language**, not coddle your ego. Did somebody laugh at your incredibly awkward way of saying something? Good! Because anything that helps you to learn is **good**, and I can assure you that when somebody laughs at one of your mistakes, you will almost *certainly* not repeat it on another occasion! The pain of being ridiculed will have taught you that *that* way of saying it wasn't right. (And by the way, when the laughter has died down, don't forget to ask the foreigner what the *correct* way of expressing that idea would have been.)

There will be times when you return to your room, feeling foolish, lonely, homesick, and the like. At such moments, you may think of catching the first plane home, and giving up your dream of learning the language. **Don't give up that easily!** Start fresh the next day, meet more people (or go out again with your friends from yesterday), and *keep trying*. Listen to their conversations, hear how they express themselves. Attempt to join in, saying whatever pops into your mind.

True, you may not be able to discuss Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" with them at this stage (even if you did get the highest mark in your college philosophy course), but after a while, you *may* be able to say: "I spilled some of my drink on the table. I'm going to go ask the waiter for a rag to clean it up." And when you can, congratulations - it's precisely everyday sentences like this one that are often the most difficult to formulate in another language!

Chapter 9

Listening and understanding: How to not get frustrated along the way

A few years ago, I had an English pupil who was a bit out of the ordinary. Most of my students are college-aged, or, if they are older, they are professional people who need English for their work. Luis, on the other hand, didn't necessarily have to learn English; he simply liked doing so. He was 46 years old, and an officer in the Spanish Army. Not surprisingly, he always learned in a disciplined manner, and preferred to progress as methodically as possible. He had been learning English on his own for only about two years, yet I was surprised at all he knew about both grammar and vocabulary, and at how well he could speak - but then, as you already know, discipline, patience and perseverance will always get you far!

The reason he wanted to have classes with me is that whenever he watched an American or British film, he was frustrated since he couldn't understand everything. Of course, if you have never had much practice speaking, and have never lived in a country where your target language is spoken, comprehending everything you hear in a film is certainly not easy: the actors speak quickly, they don't always enunciate well, they employ colloquial expressions that a foreigner wouldn't know, and so on.

I told him in the beginning that a couple of months of classes (only twice a week) wasn't going to enable him to understand everything in a film, but that he should continue to listen to as much English as possible between classes - films, radio, tapes, whatever.

A few weeks later, his frustration seemed to have lessened as far as "total comprehension" was concerned. He explained to me that he had merely *changed his attitude*: instead of intensively trying to understand every single word he heard in a film (or on an audio tape), and thus never being content, he had decided to be happy if he simply understood *something* - maybe a complete sentence here, a few words there - without worrying about knowing everything that was said. After listening to a tape once, he'd then listen to it again the next day, and maybe a couple of more times during the week. He said that each time he listened to it, he picked up more of what was being said, until he could understand at least the gist of it.

Indeed, sometimes we can make life a lot easier by not demanding too much of ourselves. True, our final goal is **excellence**. Yet besides our "grand goal", we should have lots of little goals along the way: learning so-and-so many new words every day, systematically learning the elements of grammar, etc.

And on that path, we should not confuse our final goal - excellence - with our daily goal - doing **something**, however small, in order to make definite progress.

It would be an unrealistic goal for Luis to expect to understand everything he hears in a film. But it **is** very realistic goal to expect to understand **something**. And if you approach this in a relaxed way, you will often be surprised at how much you can pick up.

Take me, for example, in my many-year quest to learn French. I had about a year of it back in college, back in the 70's. After that, I returned to it a few times, yet never had the opportunity to live in France, or to have long conversations with French people. As a result, though I can get by with what I know, my spoken French is lousy. I sometimes listen to an audio book in French, or a TV show, to see what I can grasp. Whenever I really *actively try* to understand, I find that I get a bit tense, frustrated, and am sorely tempted to change to another channel. But when I simply relax and listen, I understand a lot more.

The more you listen to your target language, the more you will pick up, especially if, at other moments of the day, you are learning your daily "quota" of new words, expressions, verb forms, etc. Allow yourself to be pleased with what you already know, instead of getting totally frustrated about how much you *don't* know. (You'll note that I say "pleased", not "satisfied", for if you are satisfied, you might not keep on learning!) When you get a chance to spend a few months in a country where your target language is spoken, you'll find that you will progress very rapidly... that is, assuming that you make it a point to associate with the "natives", and don't spend all your time hanging around with English speakers!

That last point is of supreme importance. I can never understand why some people put out the money to go to a foreign land to learn the language, and yet spend the better part of every day with friends from their own country. Well, okay, I *do* understand... psychologically, it's a lot more comfortable being with people like you, who speak your language. But when you make the leap and go to another country, **Always remember that you are there to learn a foreign language**, not simply to feel comfortable. A bit of initial discipline in this respect will reap you magnificent rewards: by speaking only your new language with native speakers, the progress you make week by week will be notable, and after about a month or so, even though you will still be having some difficulties, you will find it quite *natural* to converse in that language. At this point, you will be well on your way to being truly bilingual. And that's definitely worth the effort, isn't it?

Chapter 10

The absolute best way to learn a language quickly

When you have a look at the huge variety of foreign language learning materials on the market today, it's hard to decide what method is best. Which book or books should I buy? Do I need one book for general grammar, another for verbs? How about CDs? Should I get a complete set of them, or will a few suffice? And how many college courses will be sufficient for me to really be able to learn to speak the language more or less fluently?

Before you get started, it's only natural to want to know the very best - that is, the quickest, most efficient, and most economical - way to learn a language.

Read on, because I am going to tell it to you straight.

You may be a bit surprised by some of the things I say, for they don't necessarily correspond to convention, or to any preconceived ideas you probably have - you know, like the idea that you should take a good four years of intense college courses if you want to really master a language.

Well, even that won't do it: when you finish those courses, you'll still have to spend some time in a country where your target language is spoken if you want to achieve real fluency. That's the bad news. The *good* news is that you *don't* have to take all those courses, nor wait for years to attain your goal. And what I say isn't mere theory: it's what I myself did when I learned Spanish. Okay, I did have two basic courses in college, 101 and 102, but I can't say I learned much, since I wasn't terribly motivated. A couple of years later, however, I took a trip south of the border and fell in love with a Mexican beauty there. Now *that* gave me motivation! I was only there for about a week, during which time I could hardly talk to her at all (those two courses I had had a couple of years earlier having had little effect). That was at spring break, and I planned to return as soon as the summer holidays began. That gave me about two months to prepare. Here's what I did...

As soon as I got back to the States, I got a good basic book for learning Spanish. What are the characteristics of a "good basic book"? (In this article, I'm using Spanish as an example, though the advice would apply equally to any language you may want to learn.)

In my opinion, a good book is one that:

- teaches you the essentials of grammar, and doesn't try to fill your head with grammatical fine points that you'll practically never need. For instance, it'll teach you the verb forms: past, present, future; present and past subjunctive (necessary in Spanish). It will *not* necessarily go into the future subjunctive (since this form is never used any more). Preferably, it will be divided into small chapters. This way, it will be easier to plan how much to do every week/month.

- gives you exercises with which you can practice that grammar, **and** will include an answer key in the back. (No, not so that you can cheat, but so that after doing the exercises, you can immediately see if and where you went wrong.)

- presents you with a **basic** vocabulary (about 800 to 1500 words). If you see a **huge** dictionary-like glossary in the back of the book, don't buy it (at least not as your first book). Buy one instead that sticks to basics. After all, it's easy to expand your vocabulary once you are in the country. In the beginning, only essential vocabulary and basic grammar are necessary.

Finally, it should be a book that appeals to you. Some people, for example, like books with a lot of drawings and pictures; I myself prefer ones that get to the point, and thus have fewer pages: it gives me the feeling that I'll be able to get through it quicker!

Once you have selected a book, get a list of the most common vocabulary words, in order of frequency. (You'll probably be able to find one for free on the Internet). Of course, many of these will no doubt be in the book, but just in case, you'll want to have a list. Your goal will be to learn the most common 1000 words of that list.

Finally, get a reasonably good dictionary (English-Spanish/Spanish-English: it should go both ways.) I suggest you get a somewhat medium/small-sized one. A big dictionary is a pain to carry around, and the really small ones don't usually offer very extensive translations.

Should you not yet know how to pronounce Spanish, you can do one of two things:

1) Get some language-learning CDs along with the accompanying text book. Of course, the book may not fulfill the requirements mentioned above, but you can use this second book merely as an accompaniment to the CDs.

2) Much better: find a native Spanish speaker, and take some private lessons with him/her. I do *not* mean take several lessons every week (unless you have the cash to do so). Your main goal of working with this person will be to learn pronunciation. Concentrate on that first. Have him/her read your "essential vocabulary list" slowly, while you record it. That way, you will be able to listen to it again and again to get the pronunciation right. After a couple of weeks, have another lesson. This time, *you* read the list to your teacher, and have him/her correct your pronunciation. **Insist** that he/she be very strict, criticizing even the slightest mistake, while helping you to rectify it. Record this class as well, to use repeatedly when you study alone.

The next part may vary, depending on how quickly you want to learn. Let's suppose you would like to go to Spain next summer, and it's now February. This gives you about 5 months. Your goal will be to learn the 1000 essential words, as well as to work your way entirely through the grammar book in five months. This may sound like a lot, but it's really easier than you think, if you adhere to the three principles I mention often in this site:

Discipline, perseverance and patience.

- The **DISCIPLINE** to work regularly towards your goal, preferably doing *something* every single day.

-The **PERSEVERANCE** to work your way systematically through the materials you have.

- The **PATIENCE** that will keep you from getting frustrated, and help you to truly *enjoy* learning your new language.

Now, you'll want to plan your time. Let's see... 1,000 words in five months (about 150 days). That would make about 7 words a day. Take your essential words list, and mark off the first (most common) 210 words. That's your goal for the first month. Seven a day times 30 = 210. That shouldn't be too hard!

Next, look at your grammar book. Perhaps the chapters are of about equal length (check it out). If they are, there is one thing you should take into account. In general, the first chapters of such books are relatively easy, whereas the final ones are more complicated, and often longer. If this is so, you might want to work through the first chapters somewhat more quickly, in order to be able to spend more time on the harder materials at the end. Let's say the book has 30 chapters. That makes 6 a month for five months. I would plan to do 10 chapters (one every three days) per month. This way, should the last chapters be harder, you can afford to take them at a more leisurely pace. And if you do manage to finish the book in a mere three months, so much the better: during the two final months, you can thoroughly review all the chapters again.

In your first three days, your goal is: the most common 21 words, *plus* the first chapter of your book. For days four to seven, you'll add the next 21 words from the list, and start the next chapter... and so on, until you've worked your way through both the book and the list. Occasionally, you will set up a class with a native speaker, as explained above.

In order to make more rapid progress, you will not only do the exercises in the book, but will add one more, to be done at the end of your learning session: **write your own sentences**.

Even in the beginning, when you don't know many words or grammar, you can try to put together your own simple sentences, using the grammatical structures in the chapter you are working on, and vocabulary from your list. You see, it's one thing to do exercises, such as "fill in the blank", and the like. It's *much* better to create your *own* sentences, since after all, that is precisely what you're going to be doing when you go to Spain (or one of the many other countries where Spanish is spoken). A Spaniard will not give you an *almost* complete sentence, and ask you to "fill in the blank". He will expect you to express yourself, using your own sentences.

Writing sentences is probably the best written exercise you can do to improve your language skills. And when you have a session with a native speaker, you can ask him/her to correct your sentences (since you *will* make mistakes, most likely **many** of them!), and especially, to **explain** where you went wrong.

When the five months have passed, and you are on the eve of traveling abroad, you will be quite well-prepared for your stay in Spain. However, you must realize that all that was just the first part of your training. It's a bit like what they say about soldiering: no matter how well-trained a soldier is, he is never really prepared for battle, until he's actually experienced it a number of times. For you, your "basic training" in Spanish has been completed, and you are now heading for battle. Nothing to be scared of, though: the worst that can happen is that you put your foot in your mouth!

What should you do when you arrive? Well, many people prefer to sign up previously for a language course, and indeed, there are some excellent schools available. But I don't think that's the best way to learn quickly. What *is* the best way?

Meet Spanish people, as many as you can. It would be **ideal** if you could find yourself a Spanish girlfriend (or boyfriend) as quickly as possible. If romance is involved, you will have the opportunity to be with someone who is *dying* to talk to you for hours on end, and who will show infinite patience with your as-of-yet low-level spoken Spanish. Take it from me: this will help you learn in record time!

Okay, I realize that not everybody can be so lucky as to meet the perfect girl or guy as soon as they arrive in a foreign city. And if you have a romantic partner already, you certainly wouldn't want to cheat on him or her, would you? So what other possibilities are there? Here they are:

1) Plan to live with a Spanish family. It's probable that you could find a family that would let you live with them for a month or two, on the condition that (for example) you teach their children English. Don't do it. Your goal is to learn Spanish, and the best way to do that is to speak it exclusively while you are in Spain. Even if you speak English only a couple of hours a day, your mind will then continue to *think* in English. You want **total immersion**. This brings us to possibility number two:

2) Find a family willing to take you in for payment. Okay, you'll have to put out maybe 500-700 dollars a month for room and board, but it will be worth it. After all, you easily pay that much for a semester of Spanish in college, and believe me, if you live with a Spanish family for one month, and speak **only** Spanish with them, you will learn a **lot** more than in a college course.

3) You don't like the idea of such close contact with a family? Okay, then you can either stay in a cheap hotel, or maybe just rent a room (no meals) with a family who doesn't expect to have to spend a lot of time with you. (Personally, I'd prefer the cheap hotel, but to each his own.)

Now, though, you will need to have people with whom to converse a few hours a day (I am assuming that you haven't met a potential romantic partner... at least, not yet!).

Two ways to go about it:

1) Throw your inhibitions to the winds, and **meet people!** Go to cafés, bars, take walks around the city, and **talk** to people. (Read Chapter 22 of this book: “Seven Ways to meet People before they know what hit them”.)

2) Prefer a more conservative approach? Contract a speaking partner: someone who will **only** speak Spanish with you, and whose services will be available to you several hours a day. Three or four hours would be sufficient, five a maximum, in my opinion. After all, speaking in a new language is mentally tiring, and four hours is as much as you'll be able to comfortably take, at least in the beginning. Also, you will want at least an hour or two to spend studying on your own: memorizing new words you have learned, re-enforcing your grammar, writing sentences, etc.

Of course, this path is more costly than meeting strangers, but has the advantage that you will be speaking with someone capable of explaining the finer points of the language to you. Expect to pay about \$15-20 per hour for this service. Thus, if you plan to spend a month here, and wish to spend 3 hours daily with such a private teacher, you'll pay 30 days times 3 hours= 90 hours = \$1350-\$1800. Obviously, a language school will be cheaper per hour, but you will be in a class with a number of people, many of whom will be speaking English among themselves as soon as the class is over. With the private tutor, you will no doubt learn **much** more.

Want to cut costs? Do the following: when you get to Spain (or whichever country you have chosen), make a little sign in English (half a page in size is more than sufficient), containing a text such as this: "Native English speaker wants to learn Spanish quickly. I'll pay 6 Euros (approximately \$8.00 U.S.) an hour to anyone who is willing to talk with me, on the condition that we **only** speak Spanish! Call 555 55555, or contact me by email (add email address here)" Make at least 100 photocopies of your sign, get some tape, and take a walk to the various parts of the local University, hanging up your signs on every bulletin board you see. You will almost certainly receive offers, some of them from students who know a lot about the finer points of their own language, and will thus be able to help you immensely in your studies. And who knows? This is a great way to cut your costs by 50%, and you might end up making a lot of good friends as well!

An extra tip: if several people respond to your offer (which they surely will), try out a few of them in your first week, and even consider continuing with all of them, instead of giving all your business to one alone. This way, you will be more likely to meet more people, since each of your new teachers will have a different circle of friends, into which they might be willing to introduce you.

Now, I'll be honest with you: if you ask me which option I myself would choose to improve my speaking skills in a language - a private tutor, a language school, or meeting people on the street - I would no doubt choose the latter (the private tutor would be my second choice). Or perhaps, I'd meet people in the street for part of the day, and only contract a couple of hours with the tutor every

two days (that way, I could have the tutor answer any grammatical questions that your average person-on-the-street might not know). Since meeting people with the goal of making friends is a lot cheaper than paying for a language school or a tutor, I'd have money left over - and with that money, I could spend more time in the country. (I myself would go for at least 6 weeks to two months instead of just one month, since it's only after about a month of intense learning that things really "sink in", and you can begin to learn new material at a faster pace.)

Of course, depending on your resources, you might want to combine several of these ideas: a month in a school, followed by a month with a tutor; or a month with a tutor, followed by a month simply meeting people, once you've gained confidence in your speaking abilities; after that, you could take a more advanced course in a school in order to earn course credits. Both financial resources as well as personality will obviously play a role when choosing the best way to plan your stay in the country.

Let's add up approximate expenses from the start, using a planned three-month stay in Spain as an example:

- 1) Books, maybe \$30-\$50
- 2) Five hours a week with a native speaker, at, for example, \$10/hour, during 2 months: \$400
(After two months, you will probably have made a lot of friends with whom you can practice the language, so that you will no longer have to pay for a tutor)
- 3) Flight to Spain: \$800;
- 4) Rent for room: maybe \$700/month; 3 months = 2,100.
- 5) Food (if you have a room with access to a kitchen, and eat at home): \$250/month; \$1,500 3 months
- 6) Throw in another \$900 for three months, to go to bars, restaurants, an occasional excursion, or whatever.

Total: About \$5,750. Only \$5,350 if you don't have the tutor, but prefer meeting people and making new friends instead.

In either case, for under \$6000, you will have learned a **lot** of Spanish, and after your three-month stay here in Spain, you will be conversing quite well. It worked for me, for others I know, and will work for you, too!

One final note: I used a three-month stay in my example, since legally, an American without a visa may only remain in a country of the European Union for a maximum of three months (make sure your return plane ticket is **not** dated more than three months beyond your arrival date!). Should you wish to stay longer, signing up for courses in a school would be best, since they would help you obtain a student visa for 6 months, or a year.

Chapter 11

Practicing correct pronunciation on your own

Even after you have learned how to pronounce the words in your target language, you will have to continue practicing. Saying foreign words is, in part, a sort of "athletic" activity, in that correct pronunciation can only be achieved if we make the effort to position our mouth, lips and tongue in a certain way - and that way is often quite different from that which we use to say words in English.

Take the Spanish "D" or "T", for instance. Spaniards place their tongues *between* their teeth when they pronounce these sounds, something an English-speaker would *never* do for these letters; we only do it for our "th" sound. Or the French "u" sound (which is very similar to the German "ü"). To correctly utter this vowel sound, you form your lips as though you were going to whistle, and then try to say an "ee" sound (as in our word "seem"). The proper French "u" can only be said if the lips are in that almost-closed "whistling" position. Of course, we don't have this sound in English.

Knowing how to form the sounds in the foreign language you are learning isn't enough. You must be able to *immediately* and *spontaneously* produce them whenever you speak that language. In other words, you must train yourself to achieve proper articulation automatically, *without having to think about it*. This is at times no easy task, since when you speak a foreign language, you must concentrate mainly on *what* you want to say, on the necessary words and on the correct grammar. If, on top of all this, you also have to think about pronunciation, there's a good chance that one of these elements will come up short. Therefore, you should try to do some pronunciation training **every day** so that speaking correctly becomes second nature to you. The following is an exercise that will help you to **greatly** improve your pronunciation, and keep it "in shape".

Get a book in your target language, preferably something that is not too far beyond your reading ability, and that deals with a subject that is of interest to you (it's always easier to pick up and read a book that you like, isn't it?). If you are a beginner, you might want to pay a native speaker to record a few pages of the book for you, so that you can hear how the text should sound. Or, you can purchase an audio-book in your target language, and get the written text as well. Plan to read a few paragraphs from that book every day, following these instructions:

- You will read **aloud** for five to seven minutes. It's obvious why you should do this, is it not? After all, you want to practice pronunciation, and that's not easy to do if you don't actually *say* the words!

- Read **very** slowly, at least three times slower than normal, speaking in "slow motion", and **exaggerate** every sound in every word you say. You will try to pronounce each sound in each word as *perfectly* as possible, that is, as close to a native speaker's pronunciation as you can.

Perhaps you have seen that strange exercise they make people do in acting school: they tell you to hold a pen between your teeth, and while doing so, to read a text. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?

After all, it is completely *impossible* to pronounce the words well with a pen in your mouth. But this exercise does, of course, make very good sense: the point is to help you **become aware of how** the mouth should move to enunciate a word perfectly. That pen in your mouth forces you to strain the muscles of your mouth, lips and tongue in order to try to make your words understandable. By doing so, you become conscious of which muscles must be put into play to produce the various sounds. After a couple of minutes of this, when you take the pen out of your mouth, you will see that you can suddenly pronounce the words much more precisely than you could before you did the "pen" exercise. (Try it out; you'll see what I mean!)

There's no need to employ the "pen trick" when reading in your new language. Nonetheless, you should strive to articulate every word with decisiveness, clarity and great precision. Don't hurry: as I mentioned before, you should speak **very** slowly. Read about 3 minute's worth of text, then repeat it, attempting to improve on the first reading (if you are at a more advanced level, you can read 5-7 minute's worth of text without repeating.)

- Do this *every day*, without fail. (if you do skip a day, don't worry, it's no disaster. Just be sure you start again the following day.)

After only a few weeks, you will notice that when you read in your target language at a faster, more "normal" speed, your pronunciation will have improved significantly. Nonetheless, keep up this exercise, preferably making it a regular habit. You'll see that the rewards you reap will make it well worth your while.

Chapter 12

View the world through rose-colored glasses - Visit another country!

Imagine a city that isn't particularly attractive, or especially clean; a city where the people are no friendlier - and perhaps even considerably *less* friendly - than those in your home town. Doesn't sound very appealing, does it? Ah, but if this city just happens to be one in a country whose language you are learning, it is a different matter altogether. For in that case, *everything* about it may well seem magically attractive to you. You will overlook its defects, and only focus on the many things that you find fascinating about it. In short, you will view it through rose-colored glasses.

I distinctly remember my first months in Germany way back when, and also the first time I came to Spain. During my first weeks here in Spain, I made it a point to meet people, always an advisable procedure when you want to perfect your skills in a foreign language. Looking back at that time, I realize that some of the people I associated with were not the kind I would like to take home to introduce to my family in the U.S.

For instance, I occasionally visited a small group of young people who were to the extreme left politically. No, by that I don't mean the "Ted Kennedy/John Kerry" left; those two venerable politicians would definitely seem decidedly right-of-center in comparison with those folks I hung around with, who were more the "somewhere-between-Fidel-Castro-and-Joe-Stalin" kind of extreme left. Their days were spent mainly sitting around smoking dope and talking about when the world revolution would finally come to Spain so that *they* would be able to live the sorts of lives they *knew* they deserved. What in the world was I doing eating an occasional lunch with them in their home, and listening to all that nonsensical propaganda? Well, for me, it was actually *interesting*. Not their naïve beliefs, of course, but the fact that they were saying it all in Spanish, and I had the chance to expand my knowledge of that language by listening to them. (And I might add that though I disagreed with them, I did get a chance to see that some of them were indeed nice people - even if their views did contain more than a touch of fanaticism.)

Before living in Spain, I spent 13 years in Germany, in the city of Kassel. Kassel, like practically all the cities in Germany, is neat and clean. However, if you walk through the center, you will certainly not be impressed with its beauty, for Kassel is not an especially beautiful city - at least not since Oct 23, 1943. On the night of the 22/23 of that year, over 560 British bombers rained destruction and death over Kassel, killing about 10,000 people, and destroying more than 75% of the city (some figures put this as high as 90%). You won't see many signs of this today, since Kassel was rebuilt in the post-war years. However, the new buildings completely lack the charm of the pre-war ones, and almost all of the edifices you see in the center have that stark, modernistic,

"functional" look that often predominated in the 50's and 60's. Neat and clean, to be sure, but boring as well.

Nonetheless, during my first months in Kassel, it was the most interesting place on earth. After all, I was living in Germany, something I had always wanted to do. When I walked through the center back then, the uninteresting style of the buildings didn't bother me one bit. I hardly noticed it, since all my attention was focused on myriads of fascinating details, like signs in store windows: "Sonderangebot" (special offer), "Buchhandlung" (Bookshop), "Apotheke" ("Chemist's" to you Brits, "Drug Store" for us Americans), and the like. "Parken verboten" ("No parking allowed"), "Strassenbahn" (Street car -something I had previously only known as a wee child back in Baltimore).

Wherever I looked, there were words that I had either learned during my German studies, and was now seeing in a practical context for the first time, or words that I had never seen before, and whose meaning I had to divine - or else jot down in my little notebook so that I could look them up later.

And the people! I made it a point to ask directions often, just to have the chance to talk to people, and maybe make the acquaintance of a few. I didn't always understand the answers they gave me, but so what? I was forced to think, to try to figure out what the devil they were saying. It was a wonderful learning experience. When I had made a few friends, they informed me that people in Kassel were not known for their friendliness, but rather had the reputation of being "etwas verschlossen und misstrauisch" (somewhat closed and mistrustful). I was a trifle surprised, for I thought they were great, simply because they were German, and I was there as an American trying to master their language. I was viewing both the people as well as the city through rose-colored glasses, and I loved every minute of it!

(An aside: my conscience will not permit me to criticize Kassel's post-war appearance without commenting as well on its most remarkable feature: Park Wilhelmshöhe. This forest-like park, located on the western outskirts of the city, a few kilometers from the center, is perhaps *the* most beautiful park in Europe. It is one of my favorite places on earth, and is definitely worth going out of your way to visit. One of its most notable features is Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, -Wilhelmshöhe Palace - , which is now the seat of a fantastic art gallery, housing some 15 Rembrandts, as well as hundreds of other masterpieces. Also, let me say that the people in Kassel, though not naturally extraverted, are really fine folks and excellent friends once you get to know them, and I myself made a few life-long friends during my stay there.)

Being in a foreign city while learning the local language is one of the most wonderful, memorable and enriching experiences you can ever have, and I almost pity those who have never done so. If mastering Spanish is one of your goals, and you ever get the chance to visit a city like

Granada, Spain (where I lived for ten years), by all means, do so! Or is speaking French your aim? Besides Paris, you might want to check out delightful places like Tours, Angers, Poitiers, Montpellier, or Albi. But no matter what language you are learning, or what foreign city you choose to visit, you will find your stay there to be a treasure that you will always hold fondly in memory, and on which you will frequently look back with nostalgia in the future.

A few weeks or months wearing rose-colored glasses - recommendable to anyone who wants to add a touch of magic to life!

Chapter 13

Inertia - how it can help you... or ruin you!

You probably remember the definition of "inertia" from high-school physics class. But just in case you don't, here it is:

"The tendency of a body to resist acceleration; the tendency of a body at rest to remain at rest or of a body in straight line motion to stay in motion in a straight line unless acted on by an outside force."

What applies to a body in space can also describe our own tendencies in many areas of life. The area of learning a foreign language is no exception. Imagine that you are sitting in front of the TV, watching some show. You look at your watch, and realize that it is time for you to begin your daily language-learning session. Yet even though the show doesn't interest you very much, you still hesitate. That armchair is just SO comfortable, and it's so easy to simply stay there where you are, and not pick up a language book! Inertia has you in its grip. You *know* you should act, and begin to learn, but you tend to "remain at rest", even if it is a waste of time. What you need is an "outside force" to "act upon you" so that you begin doing what you know is worthwhile.

Don't expect a magical hand to come along and give you a shove - and let's face it, if it did, you'd probably resent it, and resist all the more. The most powerful force at your service at such times is your own **willpower**. If you tell yourself you **will** now get your book and start to learn, half the battle against laziness is won; when you then actually get up and act on your desire, you've got it made!

What often gets in our way in this type of situation is our own inner dialogue. You see, there are times when, although we don't utter an audible word, we are, in fact, "talking" too much!

The conversation is, of course, an internal one, and may follow a line similar to this one:

"Yeah, I really should learn now, I know I had planned to do a half-hour every day, and I won't have time if I wait too long, but I am so comfortable now, I really don't feel like it. Alright, I *could* discipline myself, but is it really necessary? After all, I won't be going to Europe until next summer. That gives me six more months... big deal if I don't learn anything today, I can always do twice as much tomorrow. Oh, that's right, I've got a lot of other things to do tomorrow, but then the day after tomorrow I should have more than enough time. And hey, is learning a lot now really so important? So what if I don't know *that* much by the time I get to Europe, I can probably learn all I'll need to know when I get there... the less I know beforehand, the more of a challenge my trip will be, and having a good challenge is good for the spirit....blah, blah, blah!"

In the time it takes you to think of all the reasons why it's not imperative for you to start learning *now*, you could have easily stood up, fetched your book, and learned a few vocabulary

words. Instead, you've wasted time inventing excuses that won't bring you an inch closer to reaching your goal of learning your new language. Rather foolish, isn't it?

The remedy? Simple: when the time comes for you to learn, take Nike's advice: **JUST DO IT.** **I always suggest that you keep a notebook in which to keep written track of your daily learning sessions.** This way, you will be able to follow your progress, and see whether you really are fulfilling your daily "quota" of language study.

But the first step is to learn to recognize your "negative inner dialogue", and to *silence it through action* as soon as you see that it is keeping you from doing what you **know** you should do. By this, I don't mean you should try to suppress it. On the contrary, when you first become aware of the "conversation within" in a specific situation, by all means, listen to what it is saying - but refuse to agree with it! When it says, for example, "I'm too tired to learn now, maybe I should have a nap first...", respond immediately: "Yeah, first I'll learn some new words, then I'll have my nap. That way, my subconscious mind can repeat the material while I'm asleep." Chances are, once you start to learn, you may see that you weren't so tired after all, and can take in even more information before finally having that nap - if you still need it.

Up till now, we've only talked about the negative aspects of "personal inertia" - how it can "ruin" your best intentions. But remember that there is another side to it: "a body in motion tends to stay in motion". In our language-learning context, this can mean that once you begin your learning session, you may tend to keep on studying for longer than you had expected. Naturally, this will not always be the case: you may have other things planned, or your mind may become weary. But if, on a particular day, you feel especially motivated, don't hesitate to continue learning. Memorize a few extra vocabulary words; go over some verb forms, read a page or so of text, perhaps aloud to work on pronunciation - whatever comes to mind.

You will have taken an extra step towards your goal of mastery of your target language, and where foreign languages are concerned, the more you know, the more fun it is - that's reason enough to want to progress quickly, isn't it?

Don't let inertia become an obstacle to learning - make it your ally instead, and reach your goal all the faster!

Chapter 14

Mastering a foreign language: "Automating" your thinking processes

For a moment, let's forget about any foreign language you may be learning; I would like to ask you a question, and I want you to give an immediate answer in your own mother tongue.

Question: What did you do today?

Your answer will probably be along the lines of: "Well, I got up at 8 o'clock, had breakfast, did some work around the house, watched a little TV, etc., etc...."

The truth be told, I don't really care what you did. The reason I asked was simply to point out to you how easily - how "automatically" - you are able to answer such a question when you are thinking in your native language. Obviously, it is a different matter altogether if someone asks you the same thing - and you must reply - in another language.

When you answered in your own language, you did not have to think about choosing the right vocabulary, using the correct verb forms, putting the words in the proper order, and so on. You simply replied straight out, without first considering *how* you would answer. You merely thought about what you did, and as soon as those images from today's activities entered your mind, you immediately described them.

If you had had to respond in a language you are now learning, but have not yet mastered, you would have had to stop and think about how to describe these activities. There are basically two ways that people generally do this when using a somewhat unfamiliar language:

1) They mentally "translate" before answering. For example: They remember getting up at 8 o'clock. They then think (in their mother tongue): "I got up at 8 o'clock". Next, they try to figure out how to say: "I got up" and "at 8 o'clock" in the language they are learning. To do this, they must know how to say "to get up", then to put this into past tense, adding the pronoun "I" at the beginning. They then have to remember not only how to say "eight o'clock", but also, which preposition must be used in this case. For instance, if Spanish is their target language, this task would require knowing:

- the verb "levantarse" (to get up). They must know that in Spanish, this is reflexive. The "se" part must be converted to "me" (since you are talking about yourself). The pronoun "I" doesn't necessarily have to be used, since Spanish doesn't require this. You must know the past (first person) of "levantar", which would be "levanté" (or else "he levantado", should you prefer to use the present perfect, which would be common in such a situation). So, now we have...

"Me levanté" (or "Me he levantado").

at eight o'clock" = "a las ocho". To get this, you must know that you generally don't translate the "o'clock" part in Spanish; that you say "las" (plural) and not "la", *and* that the correct preposition is "a".

Final result: "Me levanté a las ocho." (or alternatively: "Me he levantado a las ocho.")

Whew! No wonder people usually speak so slowly when they are using a language they haven't been learning long!

2) A second way to learn to speak would be a much more "direct" approach, one that does *not* involve translation: you imagine getting up, and you remember a sentence you learned that expresses the situation (that of getting up at 8 o'clock): "Me levanté a las ocho" is what you would then *automatically* say.

That sounds a lot easier to do, doesn't it? You simply have the "image" in your mind, and you *directly* and *automatically* - without translation of any sort - connect a Spanish sentence you have previously learned with that image.

Of course, the fact that there are potentially *thousands* of things you could have done in a day means that if you learn by this method alone, you would have to learn thousands of sentences by memory - not so practical after all!

Are we therefore "doomed" to always be mentally translating before we say something in our target language? Not really, for there **is** a "middle path"...

I always recommend that when people learn single words, or short, common phrases, they directly connect the image in their mind (the *image* - but *not* the English word - of "cat", "house", "I go", or whatever) with the foreign word, instead of first with the English word, and then the foreign one. That is, they form a mental picture of a cat, and think "gato" if they are learning Spanish, "Katze", "chatte" or "neko" if German, French or Japanese is their target language. If they want to say "I am going shopping", then as soon as they read that sentence in English and see its translation into the target language, they should immediately put the English sentence ("I am going shopping") out of their mind; they should only imagine themselves going shopping, and *think* "Voy a ir de compras", "Ich gehe einkaufen", "Je vais faire des courses", "Kaimono ni ikimasu" (Spanish, German, French, or Japanese, respectively). Then, they should **repeat** this sentence several times, till they can say it by memory, **all the while holding the image of themselves going shopping in their minds.**

This should always be the preferred method for learning single words, as well as short, common phrases or sentences, assuming that your goal is to learn to speak the language as quickly as possible. (If you are studying to be a linguist or a professional translator, on the other hand, it would probably be better to translate mentally as much as you can, so that you will be able to associate the words in one language with their equivalents in the other as quickly as possible.)

It goes without saying that this method cannot be the only one you use. Suppose, for example, that someone asks you a question which requires an answer such as:

"It wasn't a banana peel, but rather a piece of wet rag I slipped on just before I fell and broke my leg right below the knee."

This sentence contains quite a few details, doesn't it? And if you wanted to learn by the "direct association" method (that is, **imagine** the situation, then **say** a sentence you have previously learned to describe that situation), you would have to learn literally millions of sentences in order to be able to cover all the possibilities you might experience in life. Highly impractical, without a doubt!

The solution, therefore, is to use "direct association" - as mentioned earlier - for learning single words, and short, very common phrases/sentences. For more complex statements, you will indeed have to rely on your knowledge of grammar, syntax and specific vocabulary, in order to "put together" all of the elements you need so that you can express more detailed situations or ideas. However, this really isn't so bad. Your foreign conversation partner most likely will be willing to show quite a bit of patience if you are explaining how you slipped on that piece of wet rag and broke your shin bone. But people won't be as patient if you take two minutes just to say you got up at eight o'clock!

And once you reach a more advanced level of language study, you will see that it becomes easier and easier to express complex contents without having to "mentally translate" first. Then it will only be a question of time before you can have long, detailed, and even profound conversations in your new language without having to think in English at all. Then you may allow yourself to go enjoy a bottle of good champagne, for you will have finally reached your goal!

Chapter 15

Communicate faster when speaking a foreign language: Learn to simplify

Imagine this situation: you have been living in Germany for a few weeks, trying to learn the language. Some people you know mention a party they are going to attend at Jochen's house, but Jochen isn't there with you and the others now, and he hadn't given you a previous invitation to the party. Therefore, you don't go. The next day, you see Jochen on the street, and he says to you:

"Hallo! Wie geht's? Warum bist du nicht zur Fete gekommen? Du hast uns gefehlt!"

(Hi! How are you? Why didn't you come to the party? We missed you!")

You would like to answer, in German, "I would have come if I had known you wanted me to."

The only problem is, your conditionals and subjunctives are somewhat weak at best, and you can't seem to get the sentence together in your mind, let alone actually say it.

Such cases cause foreign language learners a lot of grief. They first think of a possible response in their own language, but since they tend to think in more complicated terms, and want to say *exactly* what is on their minds in the other language, they stumble, and often fail.

The solution here is to learn to simplify. This requires more mental flexibility than you may think, but it can be practiced. I myself have a certain talent for simplification when speaking other languages, and this has helped me a lot over the years. There were times when I've been able to give the impression that I knew the language much better than I actually did, which of course has the disadvantage that people will then tend to speak to you more quickly, and you may not be able to follow what they're chattering about! On the other hand, simplification definitely helps you to get your message across more quickly, and almost as efficiently as would more complex sentences.

In the case above, for instance, the most exact translation of what you want to respond would be:

"Ich wäre gekommen, wenn ich gewusst hätte, dass du es wolltest."

(I would have come if I had known you wanted me to.)

But you can convey the same idea in a considerably simpler fashion:

"Ich wusste nicht, dass du mich einladen wolltest." (I didn't know you wanted to invite me.)

Here, you're only using past tenses, no conditional/subjunctive constructions.

Or how about simply: "Schade! Ich wusste es nicht..." (That's a shame! I didn't know...)

Though not the same as your original thought, it does get the message across.

Of course, you could also say:

"Niemand hat mich eingeladen." (Nobody invited me.)

But you should be careful here, since Jochen might think you're criticizing him for not inviting you!

I can read in French, but depending on the book, there may be a *lot* of vocabulary I don't understand. This is one reason I love to read the works of Voltaire: he was a great master of expressing even complex ideas with delightful simplicity. (If you are studying French, I recommend you get a volume of Voltaire as soon as you can - even if it's one of his philosophical works, you might be surprised at how much you can understand!)

A good way to practice simplification is to first try it out in your own language. In everyday situations, just after saying something to someone, ask yourself how you could have said it even more simply. Also, you can use sentences in your foreign language book: read a rather long sentence, figure out its meaning, and then try to express (in the target language) that sentence's content in another, simpler way. Break down longer sentences into two or three separate ones. Omit words that are a bit superfluous. See if you can get the same meaning across using simpler verbs, whose forms you already know, or by using simpler tenses. Remember, your goal here is not to create literature, nor to work out a worthy paraphrase of the original sentence: it is merely to acquire practice saying the same thing in a much easier way.

Naturally, when you've been in the foreign land for a longer time, you will want to express yourself in a more precise, and perhaps even refined, manner. Take your time. In the beginning, the main thing is to make yourself understood, and if you master the art of conveying even complex ideas in a clear, simple way, not only will you be able to get your message across - you might even find that people perceive your clarity and simplicity of expression as being rather elegant!

Next, we will see how a famous archaeologist managed to learn to speak many languages, including ancient Greek. Curious as to what method he used? Read on...

Chapter 16

Heinrich Schliemann's method of language learning

I have always believed that in order to learn more about how to do something, it can be quite beneficial to **study the methods of those who are experts at it**. While reading a book on ancient Greece recently, I came across a description of how Heinrich Schliemann went about learning a new language.

The famous 19th-century German archeologist Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890), who pursued a life-long dream of excavating the remains of Homeric Troy, no doubt had a genius for language. Within the space of two years, he taught himself fluent Dutch, English, French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, and later went on to learn seven more, including both modern and ancient Greek.

How could we, who generally consider ourselves lucky if we manage to learn only one or two foreign languages in the course of an entire lifetime, not be curious about the method he used? Let's hear what Schliemann himself had to say about how he approached the challenge of mastering another tongue:

"In order to acquire quickly the Greek vocabulary," Schliemann wrote, "I procured a modern Greek translation of 'Paul et Virginie' [a French novel; Schliemann already knew French], and read it through, comparing every word with its equivalent in the French original. When I had finished this task I knew at least one half the Greek words the book contained; and after repeating the operation I knew them all, or nearly so, without having lost a single minute by being obliged to use a dictionary. Of the Greek grammar I learned only the declensions and the verbs, and never lost my precious time in studying its rules; for as I saw that boys, after being troubled and tormented for eight years and more in school with the tedious rules of grammar, can nevertheless none of them write a letter in ancient Greek without making hundreds of atrocious blunders, I thought the method pursued by the schoolmasters must be altogether wrong... I learned ancient Greek as I would have learned a living language."

He doesn't say how he learned to pronounce ancient Greek, but since nobody speaks it any more, this probably didn't really matter to him too much. In any case, one must admire the man's ingenuity, and above all, his freedom from conventional ideas about how languages "should" be learned. Though we tend to put such people into a category of their own, labeling it "genius", the truth is that one of the things that separates a so-called genius from ordinary mortals is simply the fact that *they* don't limit themselves by doing everything the way most other folks do, or by the way that "authorities" say it must be done: **they find, or create, their own methods, and do whatever works well for them.**

When we begin to learn a foreign language, we usually use a book whose first chapters are filled with "baby stuff": "Hello, how are you? My name is David." or "The cat is in the house. My

brother lives in Rome”, and such things. Of course, that would seem easier to learn than picking up a regular book in your target language and, only with the help of an English translation, working your way through it sentence by sentence, the way Schliemann did. But then, he taught himself to speak *ancient Greek* in such a way, so who is to say that his method wouldn't work for us if we wanted to learn French, Italian, or German? We could always take a few classes with a native speaker for the pronunciation, and to take our first steps in conversation.

And the grammar? Well, by comparing the foreign language text to an English translation, we would get a good idea of grammatical structures; the fact that such structures would repeat themselves quite often during the course of an entire book would mean that we would have ample opportunity to "absorb" them, and to learn to use them properly on our own.

There are really only two reasons why this method might not work for you. First of all, it would take a lot of thought, and a lot of discipline, to work your way through a foreign language book this way. You would have to basically construct your own grammar book as you go along, taking notes comparing structures in both languages, making your own lists of prepositions, pronouns, verb forms, etc., as you encounter them, and so on. Of course, when you buy a standard language-learning book, all the grammar has already been "spelled out" for you, which makes it seem a lot easier. On the other hand, I can't help but think that if you *did* do it Schliemann's way, collecting and organizing such grammatical information on your own might well help you to learn it considerably faster, and to understand it a lot better.

The other reason why this method may appear to be beyond our abilities is merely because it is so unusual: "Nobody does it that way!" may be the way you respond when you read about Schliemann's procedure. You may feel that if it is so uncommon, it can't be so great, or maybe that it just couldn't work for a "normal person" like yourself. This is more of a psychological block than anything else, and overcoming it could be a rather mind-expanding experience. It is true that especially at the beginning, when you don't have any vocabulary at all, the idea of actually beginning to read a book (albeit with the aid of a translation) in the other language would seem daunting, almost to the point of appearing to be impossible. But I suspect that if you actually tried it this way, after a week or so, it wouldn't seem so hard at all, and you may well make rapid progress. And if the book you use (or I should say, "books", since you would have one in your target language, as well as a translation in your native tongue) is about something which greatly interests you, by the time you finish it, you will not only have learned a lot about the new language, but also a good bit of fascinating information.

I myself have not tried this method yet, but at some time in the future, I certainly will. I may not be so ambitious as to want to follow in the *archeologist* Schliemann's footsteps, searching out

the ruins of ancient Troy, but trying out the *linguist* Schliemann's method of language learning holds a definite attraction for me, and could well be rewarding for anyone who tries it.

Chapter 17

The musician's language learning advantage: More than just "good hearing"

I have often been struck by the many parallels there are between learning music and learning languages. They say that musicians have a special talent for picking up new languages, and I do believe that in general, this is true. I could name many famous classical musicians who speak several languages with relative ease. Normally, we attribute this ability to the musician's superior listening skills, and this is no doubt part of it: the more we train ourselves to listen carefully, the better we will be able to pronounce foreign words, for example.

But I think there are other reasons for this as well (apart from more acute listening skills), ones that have to do with the way musicians practice the music they will later play in public. I myself am a musician (a harpsichordist), and I have often thought about exactly what steps I go through to learn a piece. (Even if you do not play an instrument, don't hesitate to read on: I promise not to burden you with any technical terms!)

When I decide to learn a piece of music, I first look it over, and read (play) through it, in order to get a general idea of how I want to go about practicing it. This is similar to when we first listen somewhat more closely to a foreign language we would like to learn, and perhaps have a look at some text in that language, too.

Upon starting with the "work" phase, I usually break the music down into smaller parts, "phrases", or somewhat larger sections. Then, I begin playing that section quite slowly, doing my best to make every note sound as it should, since I want each to be clearly distinguishable, and also to fit naturally into the phrase. If, after playing this section through the first time, I hear that some things just don't "sound right", I begin to ask myself why. Could it be that I am not shaping the phrase correctly? Perhaps I'm placing accents where they don't belong? Or have I chosen to play certain notes with the "wrong" fingers (that is, maybe it would sound more natural if I played those notes with another fingering). At times, several problems occur in one small section. Occasionally, what sounds like a big problem can be smoothed out by making one seemingly minor change in how I'm playing. If I'm lucky, there aren't any problems at all: in this case, I'll repeat the section a few times to get it "in the fingers" (another way of saying "in my tactile memory"), and I then move on to the next section.

When I go about studying a language, I basically take the same steps: I first look over the material I want to learn that day, and then start with a small section of it. I pronounce the new words. If I hear that they somehow don't sound right, I analyze why this may be. Could it be that I'm not forming my lips or mouth in the right way? Is the tongue positioned as it should be to enunciate the sound well? When I've identified the problem, I make corrections, and keep trying till

I get it right. When I do, I'll go over that section a few more times, and then move on. Should a section be easy, I don't spend much time on it, but continue with the next part.

In music, once you've worked through the entire piece section by section, you naturally want to play it in its entirety. On a good day, it will soon be sounding rather good. But on occasion, even though you've practiced every section carefully, the piece sounds somehow "funny" when you play it through to the end. Maybe the tempo (speed) isn't right; you might try to play it faster, or slower. Or worse: it could be that you suddenly realize that your playing is devoid of all emotion! If so, it's best to take a break and continue later, since it's hard to force yourself to "feel".

Something similar can happen with a language, and this phenomenon never ceases to amuse me. Once, I had my French teacher go over a single sentence with me. I insisted that she not be satisfied until I say every single word *exactly* the way a Frenchman would. After some time, I was able to say each word perfectly; she assured me that each word I uttered sounded just like a Frenchman would say it. However, when I then said the entire sentence, I had an accent: though each word was enunciated perfectly, I didn't make the sentence "flow" the way a Frenchman would. It took a while longer for her to teach me that, too. After a few more minutes of "training", I got it right. I could say that sentence perfectly in every way. But as soon as I read the next sentence, my non-French accent was once again perfectly obvious!

Just as it's important to have the "feel" of a piece of music in order to play it well, you must also learn the "feel" of a language. I think that far too many people put off this phase of their foreign language training for too long. If, from the beginning, you learn how to pronounce not only the single words, but also entire sentences - getting the "feel" for the proper "flow" of each phrase - you will have a huge head start as far as true mastery of the language is concerned. Following the example musicians give us will doubtlessly be of great use to you here:

- First, **look over** the material to be studied
- **Listen** carefully to how it should sound (with the help of a teacher, or CDs)
- **Start with a small part**, then, ask yourself if you're getting it right.
- **If not, ask yourself why not**, find out the reason(s), make corrections and *try again and again* till it's as close to perfect as possible.
- **Do the following sections the same way**
- When you've finished the material you want to cover for that day, **go over it from beginning to end**, to make sure you remember it well. Read everything aloud at a somewhat more rapid pace, making sure that your pronunciation doesn't suffer while doing so.

And just as a musician will usually come back to the pieces he/she learned during previous days or months in order to "freshen up" the music in his/her mind, it will help you if, after working

though a number of chapters of your language book, you then go back to the beginning and start reviewing the basics.

You may, or may not, have superior listening ability. No matter: if you follow these steps in each and every one of your language learning sessions, your speaking skills will no doubt improve. You see, you don't have to be a musician to master your favorite foreign language!

Chapter 18

Should we learn as children do?

There are some language teaching methods that are based on the idea that when adults begin a foreign language, they should try to learn it as children do during the first years of their lives. In such books, often no explanations are given in English; everything is explained - albeit in a simplified fashion - in the target language. Grammar usually isn't stressed much. Instead, there are a lot of pictures with accompanying texts, conversations, etc. The teacher who uses such an approach speaks exclusively in the target language. Naturally, concrete situations which can be easily recognized by the students are used as settings for these conversations, for if more abstract areas were dealt with, it would be extremely difficult for the students to follow what is going on.

The rationale behind this type of method is that children learn their native tongue without recourse to grammar, or even reading and writing. Rather, they learn by listening and repeating. If it works for them, why shouldn't it work for adults?

I personally am not completely convinced of this approach for two reasons:

1) Adults' brains don't work exactly like those of children. When you consider all that a child learns in the first four or five years of life, it becomes obvious that a child's brain is decidedly more "absorbent" than that of an adult. I'm certainly not qualified to explain the scientific reasons why this is so, but my own observations make it plain to me that children are almost always more open than adults. Their minds are much more receptive for all they encounter. Also, they are relatively unfettered by inhibitions. Many adults, for example, are afraid of trying to speak in a foreign language, for fear of sounding ridiculous. Children, on the other hand, are seldom so inhibited: they simply speak out, and if it's not quite right, they probably don't even realize it, and don't care much anyway!

2) The advantage the adult has over the child is the fact that he/she has developed a superior capacity to reason, as well as to analyze. When we try to learn a language the way children do - by simply seeing, hearing, and repeating, with no attempt to analyze *why* things are said in certain ways - we rob ourselves of the chance to use one of our main strengths, that is, to logically sort out how the language is structured, how the rules of grammar are applied, the precise differences between the target language and our native one, and so on. If you know the verb tenses in Spanish, for example, it's much easier to learn them in French, Italian, or even in German, since you have a better idea of what you're looking for. If you wish to say, for instance, "I will have dinner in the city tomorrow", you know you need to use the future tense, and if you have taken care to learn the verb tenses well in your new language, this information will be readily retrievable.

This is not to say that I don't approve at all of "total immersion" methods. On the contrary, I feel that "submerging" yourself completely in a language (preferably by living in a foreign country

for a while) is almost a necessity if you really want to advance quickly, and to eventually master your new language. However, I feel that in the beginning (if possible, *before* taking a trip to another country), you should learn the language's basic grammar, using a book that explains everything in your own tongue. This way, you will grasp the fundamentals of grammar much more quickly.

Even when you are in another country, and are (hopefully) spending a lot of time conversing with the natives, you will want to have a good grammar book back in your room, so that you can study different grammatical constructions you heard during the day, and compare them to English (should that be your own mother tongue). After all, there will be many times in the beginning of your stay in the other country when you will think something in English, and will want to then transform it into your target language, so doing comparative studies of the two languages will make it easier for you to convert what you wish to express from one language to the other.

When you are living in a "total immersion" setting, you will have many opportunities to pick up new words and expressions the way children do, and this is fine. Just don't deprive yourself of all the help your adult, rational, logical mind can give you in your quest towards acquiring a new language: after all, you have spent all of your life developing these facets of your mind, so it would be a shame if you didn't put them to good use!

Chapter 19

How long will I need to learn a foreign language? A couple of years ago, a Spanish girl, about 20 years old, answered one of my ads for English classes. She had a very low level of English, but had decided that she now wanted to learn it once and for all. During our initial conversation, she asked me straight out: "¿Cuánto tiempo necesito para aprender inglés?" - "How long will it take me to learn English?"

I admit that I was speechless for a second (and this doesn't happen very often!). I replied: "Well, if you have a photographic memory, an excellent and refined sense of hearing, a profound knowledge of the grammar in your own language, an IQ of at least 150, and if you are willing to work on it for no less than 8 hours a day, you'll be speaking fluently in less than a month!"

That "less than a month" part was probably what put the delighted smile on her face, but then, looking more serious, she asked: "And if I don't have all those qualities?" I answered: "Then you're probably looking at a few years, that is, unless you decide to spend this summer in England or America, in which case you'll progress more quickly."

Obviously, mastering a foreign language has much to do with our natural talents. Years ago, I read an article about the German Grand Master of Chess, Robert Hübner. It seems that he had to go to Hungary for a tournament, but unfortunately, didn't speak the language. No problem! He bought himself a good book, boarded the train, and when he arrived in Budapest after an eight-hour journey, he could speak Hungarian more than well enough to get by. Of course, Herr Hübner almost no doubt *does* have a photographic memory, an extremely high IQ, and so on.

I myself have nowhere near the mental brilliance of a Robert Hübner (if my accomplishments, years ago, on my college chess team are any measure of this), though I am certainly not without talent as far as language learning is concerned.

The truth is, I think most people can pick up another language in a year, as I did with Spanish, if they go about it the right way (see the article in this book: "The absolute best way to learn a language quickly"). Not that it can't be done in less time, for I feel it can, especially if you are willing to spend more time in a foreign country. On the other hand, if you are unwilling, or unable to spend any time at all in a country where your target language is spoken, it will probably be *very* difficult indeed to reach fluency within a year (unless, of course, you have the opportunity to converse frequently with native speakers of that language while staying in your own country - something most of us would find either very difficult, or very expensive, to arrange).

A key concept here is "commitment". Have you really committed yourself to learning a foreign language fluently? If so, you will take the necessary steps, including making a financial investment, to reach that goal. While living in Spain, I knew more people than I could count who *said* they really wanted to learn English, but who then did not "walk the walk": they skipped classes, stopped

learning completely whenever the holidays came around, didn't take the time to memorize new vocabulary words, and so on. Personally, I would rather not even start than try to progress like this, for it's a sure path to frustration, and perhaps even eventual failure.

Of course, in many of these cases, those people only wanted to learn English because they thought it would help them get ahead at their job (or find a job, should they have been unemployed at the time); what they were lacking is **passion**, so it's only natural that they didn't make a serious commitment to their supposed "goal". When such people ask for my advice on how to proceed, I will often tell them to forget it - that is, **until they are seriously willing to do what it takes to learn**. If not, why waste time fooling yourself into thinking you are really progressing, when in fact your lack of dedication is slowing down progress almost to a halt? If the day comes when they feel that now, they not only think they "should" learn English, but are **truly enthusiastic** about doing so, it would then be the right time to start, with all the zeal at their disposal. *That's* when progress will not only be rapid, but will seem practically effortless. *That's* when they will be able to learn more English, in a single year, than they had in the previous five or ten years, while they were engaged in a half-hearted, and therefore nearly futile, effort to learn.

Make a commitment to your goal, and follow through on it with enthusiasm, even obsession: that's the surest ticket to learning a foreign language in record time!

Of course, dedicating yourself consistently to achieving even the best goals isn't always easy, due to certain weaknesses of human nature.

How, then, can you go about forming the right habits, and even increase your love of learning a language, which of course would lead to greater motivation?

Read on...

My new book "**Language Learning – Outside the Box!**" deals with (among many other subjects) precisely this issue.

You know what it's like...

At first, you were so terribly enthusiastic about learning a new language. Picking up your book and learning something every day was fun! But then, as the weeks passed, you started losing motivation. You just didn't seem to be learning fast enough, and were sorely aware that it was going to take quite some time for you to be able to really learn that language. It wasn't really fun anymore; studying had become a tedious chore rather than a pleasure, and before long, you were letting entire days, and then weeks pass without even opening your book.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that there are very simple mental techniques that will enable you to...

- maintain your level of motivation
- not get frustrated or bored with learning
- form proper study habits: ones that will help you to become unstoppable in your path towards language mastery
- And above all, keep the “fun” in learning

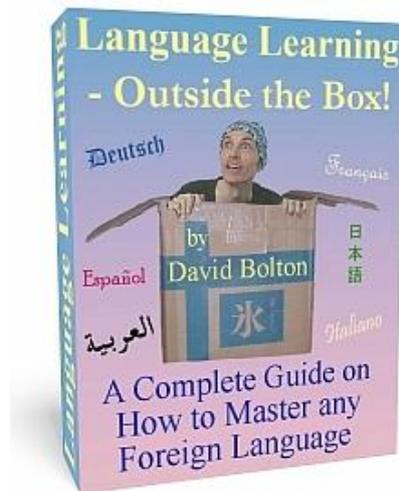
You will learn all this in the first part of “Language Learning – Outside the Box!”

Here are just a few of the other topics discussed:

- How to Acquire Correct Pronunciation
- Achieving Excellent Pronunciation - another Powerful Method
- The Role of Imagination in Language Learning
- Practicing Verb Forms
- Learning Sentences: How to "Group" Concepts
- Getting over the "Conversational Bump"

And there’s much more! Check out the complete Table of Contents, and read more about how “Language Learning – Outside the Box!” can help you to master the language of your choice!

[Click here](#) to go there right now.



Chapter 20

Second-Language learning Challenge: Word Order

When we are learning a second language, one of the first things we must get used to is the syntax - that is, the rules that govern the sentence structure - of that language.

As we think or speak in our own language, we put the words in a certain order, depending on the thought expressed, and the words we use to express it. The word order we habitually use seems perfectly natural to us, which is why we often have difficulties adapting to sentence structures in different languages.

Take the following sentence in English: "I can't go because I am ill."

In Spanish, the order is roughly the same (the pronouns - in this case, "I" - are not usually used in Spanish :

"No puedo ir porque estoy enfermo." Word-for-word translation: "No can go because am ill."

This isn't too hard to understand, or to get used to. Yet in German, it's a bit trickier:

"Ich kann nicht gehen, weil ich krank bin." (WfW: word-for-word): "I can not go, because I ill am."

The use of "weil" (=because) requires that we place the conjugated verb in that clause at the end. When you try to learn German, this is something that takes some getting used to!

Nonetheless, many European languages are similar enough in their word order that we can generally grasp the meaning of the sentence, as long as we understand the individual words in it.

Since moving to Japan, I have, for the first time in my life, taken up the study of a non-European language, and believe me, it can get very confusing indeed!

To show what I mean, let me take a short sentence that we will first analyze in English, German and Spanish: "I will go, even if it rains." German: "Ich werde gehen, sogar wenn es regnet." WfW (word-for-word): I will go, even if it rains. (Just like English)

Spanish: "Voy a ir, incluso si está lloviendo." WfW: "(I) am going to go, even if it is raining." (Also like English)

Japanese: "Ame ga furu tomo ikimasu." WfW: "Rain - falls - even if - go."

There's another way to say this same thing in Japanese:

"Ame demo ikimasu." WfW: "Rain - but - I go."

I don't know about you, but when I see a sentence like that, even if I understand each word, I still have trouble guessing what it actually means.

When studying Japanese, I often see such sentences - one whose words I understand, and yet whose total meaning leaves me clueless. The word order is simply so strange (from the perspective of someone who is used to the syntax of common European languages) that try as I may, I am often forced to ask my (Japanese) wife to tell me what the devil is being expressed by the sentence!

Thus, logic - that is, the "logic" we use to construct our sentences - is of little or no help when tackling a non-European language. The solution? Repetitive practice of the sentences in the foreign language, along with the use of the imagination, to connect word groups with meaning, instead of merely translating into your own language.

Using the Japanese example above:

"Ame demo ikimasu." First, say "ame" and imagine "rain". Then, say "demo" and think "even if/but". Then repeat: "Ame demo", but do **not** translate (to "rain even if/but", for this would make little sense to you). Instead, think "Ame demo" and imagine being in a situation where it might rain, and then imagine the **concept** of "even if". In other words, you will be saying (or thinking) the words "Ame demo", but you will be imagining a **situation** in which "it might rain, but even if it does...."

Imagine that situation, **not** the English words we would use to describe that situation.

Finally, add "ikimasu" (the "I go" part) when thinking "Ame demo":

"Ame demo ikimasu." Repeat it to yourself, imagining in turn the rain, the concept of "even if", and the concept of "I go".

If you deal with the sentence in this fashion, it suddenly seems rather easy: the initial difficulty was obviously merely caused by our tendency to think in terms of the syntax of our own language, instead of adapting our minds to the word and thought patterns of the Japanese.

If and when you learn a non-European language, you will avoid a lot of trouble if you use this sort of approach when faced with sentence structures that puzzle you no end!

Chapter 21

Those Frustrating Phrasal Verbs!

For those of us who are native speakers of English, the term "phrasal verb" may have little meaning, and we have probably never seen the necessity of seeking a phrasal verb list for the purpose of memorizing it, or indeed for any other purpose.

Yet for non-native speakers of our language, these infamous combinations are a source of frustration, dismay and countless hours of hard work.

Just what is a phrasal verb, anyway?

One common definition is that it is a verb plus a particle - preposition or adverb - that, as a unit, has a meaning that is not equivalent to the verb and complement alone.

For example: "to look up". We often "look up" a word in the dictionary, that is, we seek its meaning. Yet when we do so, we are not really casting our gaze upwards at all. "Look up" therefore has a specific meaning that actually has nothing to do with "looking up(wards)".

"To get in" is another example. "Get in the car!" We all understand that, yet in fact "to get" usually means "to receive". You **get** a present. You **get** a new cat. But, to get "in"? It doesn't seem to make sense when you think about it, does it? Here, the phrasal verb "to get in" simply means to enter, when we are entering a rather confined space: get in the elevator, get in the car, get in the closet, etc.

Anyone who has taught English to foreigners, as I have for many years, knows how much trouble they can have with these constructions. Since their meanings cannot be divined logically, (and since foreigners have not been exposed to these units since childhood, as we have), they feel that their only recourse is to memorize long lists of phrasal verbs, in the hope that they will pass their next English test. Unfortunately for them, due to translation subtleties, memorizing doesn't guarantee that they will be able to use them properly.

Here's a concrete example from one of my classes that I taught in Granada, Spain.

I was giving a private conversation class to Maria, a college student whose English level was relatively good. She was telling me about something that had happened to her a few days before...

"I went to the department store with my little brother, and he got lost. It took me a half hour to look him up!"

I laughed, but I knew what she meant, and why she had made this mistake. She had learned that the English phrasal verb "to look up", in Spanish, means "buscar/encontrar" (equivalent to "seek/find"). After all, when you "look up" a word in the dictionary, you seek and find it, right?

I had to explain to her that while "look up" does mean "seek and find" when we are talking about words in a dictionary, articles in an encyclopedia, or numbers in a telephone book, it does **not** mean this when we are talking about finding someone who is lost.

Her problem was that she didn't realize just how specifically these expressions must often be used in order for them to make any sense at all.

Thus, even after a non-native speaker of English has memorized a list of phrasal verbs together with an approximate translation of each one into his/her own language, there is no guarantee that he/she will use them correctly: when they use these verb constructions in a conversation with a native speaker, they may end up getting laughed at. No wonder that learners of English get so frustrated!

Often, foreigners will adopt what seems to them to be a practical strategy: they will memorize a phrasal verbs list in order to pass their English exams, but when conversing, they will use alternatives instead.

For example, instead of trying to say "I called up my mother", they will say "I phoned my mother"; for "I ran out of sugar", they will say "I didn't have any more sugar."

I had an advanced pupil named Enrique whose English was rather good, yet he almost never used phrasal verbs, which made his speech sound a bit strange. After all, no native English speaker would speak for even a few minutes without using one or more of them.

In order to help these and other students, master such expressions, I recorded a series of mp3 files, in which I spoke about the one hundred most common phrasal verbs, giving not only their meanings, but also examples of their correct usage (see the section after this article for details on how you can purchase this product). This seemed to do the trick: after listening to these files a number of times on their mp3 players, my students gradually were able to incorporate them into their speech and writing, which of course greatly improved their level of English.

Over thirty years of teaching English to people of many countries has shown me some of the best ways to help foreigners master the phrasal verbs:

- use phrasal verb lists only as guidelines, to make sure that the most important ones are indeed learned. Do not insist upon having your students memorize such lists, for that process is long and tedious, and in the end, will not assure that they use them properly anyway.

- When conversing with your students, point out the phrasal verbs that occur, give further examples of their usage, and above all, tell them just how specifically they often must be used if they are to make any sense at all.

- Encourage the use of audio. I use a series of mp3 files that I have made available, and this approach has had excellent results: students master the most common phrasal verbs with a minimum of effort. The key here is to use audio conversation that has a lot of phrasal verbs, and preferably repeats them, so that the learner may assimilate them more quickly and efficiently.

Above all, take pity on all those millions of people who, because they are learning English, have no choice but to undertake a monumental struggle to learn the notorious English phrasal verbs.

If you are a native speaker, be glad that you have learned them from early childhood on, so that they don't cause you any problems at all.

And if you are a non-native speaker of English who still makes mistakes with phrasal verbs, take heart: patience, persistence and continual practice will solve your problems, not only where these linguistic demons are concerned, but in many other areas of your life as well!

Author's Bio

David Bolton - writer, teacher, speaker, musician, actor and astrologer - has been teaching languages for over thirty years, in Germany, Spain, and most recently, Japan. He has always sought out, and regularly employed, the most practical language learning techniques and methods, including techniques to expand his students' learning ability. David's other interests include history, psychology, politics, philosophy, quantum physics, classical music, clairvoyance, hypnosis, and all areas related to self-improvement.

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