



# My Top 10 Language Learning Advice

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I speak seven languages, but it's been a long, challenging road to where I am now. So here is my top 10 advice.

Hopefully by reading this, you can avoid some of the same mistakes I've made!

## 1. Take control

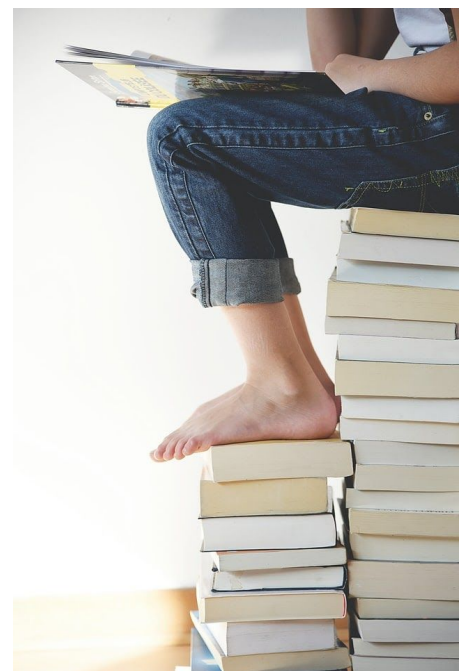
When you learn a language in school, you have no control. The teacher tells you what you're learning today, you open the textbook and you do the exercises. Many learners continue in this way as an adult. They pay for courses so that the teacher can tell them what page to open the textbook to and which exercises to do.

But it didn't work very well in school, did it? So why would it work now? Here's the truth: **to become fluent<sup>1</sup> in a language, you HAVE to take control into your own hands.** Don't wait for someone else to tell you what to do. Guide yourself. The good news is, if you're reading this, you've already taken the first step!

## 2. Reading and listening are the key

I say this all the time to my students. The ONLY things that will increase your language over time in all areas (vocabulary, grammar, spelling, speaking, writing) are reading and listening. Why? Because our brains are machines for building languages in our heads. To build a language, only one thing works: input<sup>2</sup>, in the form of listening to and reading things that we understand and that interest us.

Don't believe me? [This talk by language scientist Stephen Krashen is a great introduction to the topic.](#)



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<sup>1</sup> Able to speak a language easily

<sup>2</sup> Input = putting things in, giving data to a machine

### 3. It's a marathon<sup>3</sup>, not a sprint<sup>4</sup>

Learning a language to fluency takes a long time. Like, a really long time. Children learn faster than adults not because they have special magical brains, **but because they are surrounded by the language for 9 hours a day for 10+ years of their life.**

If we do the maths, the average 10-year-old has heard 32,850 hours of their native language. You can't get that by going to class for one hour a week!

Luckily, studies suggest that adults only need 1000-1500 hours of a language to become an advanced speaker. Still, that's a lot! If you read and listen for 3 hours a day all year you could hit 1095 hours and reach a high level. But most people don't have 3 hours a day, and not everyone learns at the same speed.



So relax. You're not going to reach your goal in a few months, and that's OK. We're here for a marathon, not a sprint!

Speaking of goals...

### 4. Habits > goals

When you set a goal, two things can happen.

One, you reach your goal. Fantastic! Time to celebrate. But now that you've reached your goal, do you have the motivation<sup>5</sup> to continue? You could work towards the next exam, but that sounds hard! Maybe you should take a break...

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<sup>3</sup> A marathon is a very long run, over 26 miles. People have to train for months before doing a marathon.

<sup>4</sup> A sprint is a very short run, often 100 metres, but you are trying to run very fast.

<sup>5</sup> Motivation is the energy to do something, the want to do something

Two, you don't reach your goal. Uh-oh! You probably feel very sad. You might even eat a lot of ice cream. Again, do you have the motivation to continue? Maybe you decide that you need to take a break, or that you're bad at English.

But let's think of it another way. What if you say, 'I'm going to listen to an episode of *Easy Stories in English* every day for a year.'

Technically<sup>6</sup>, this is a goal, but really it's a habit. Just like brushing your teeth in the morning or eating breakfast, it's something you do every day. It's not a big, difficult task, and the more you do it, the easier it is.

With the right habits, your goals will complete themselves.

## 5. Make it fun

Believe it or not, research says that when we have fun, we learn more. Our brain focuses more and can take in more information. This is *especially* true for learning a language.

Too often, I see students do this:

'I should read a book in French. Hmm... I should read a difficult book on a topic I don't know much about, like physics. Then I'll learn the most. Woah, this book is hard! I'll just take a break from it...'

And then they never pick the book up again.

Instead, do this:

'I should read a book in French. I know! I'll choose a book that's easy, so I don't have to keep looking up words in the dictionary, and I'll choose something I love reading about. Ooh, how about a romance novel? This is so much fun! I'll just read another chapter...'

And before you know it, you're reading book after book.



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<sup>6</sup> Technically = if we are looking at the dictionary definition

## 6. You have to want it

Don't learn a language just because you feel like you 'have to'. I know this is hard, because many of you DO need English for work or study. But you need to find the part of it you *want*.

Do you want to be able to read a novel in English without looking up words? Do you want to travel to New York and chat with locals<sup>7</sup>? Do you want to listen to the *Harry Potter* audiobooks<sup>8</sup>?

Figure out what you really want, and focus on that. Otherwise, you'll lose interest.



## 7. There is no plateau

Many people talk about 'hitting the intermediate plateau', when you get to an intermediate level in a language and stop improving.

This is only true if you are learning the traditional way - memorising<sup>9</sup> vocabulary and grammar. Our brains cannot reach a high level in a language that way.

How can they? **By learning through reading and listening.** As I said before, this input allows our brain to build a model of the language so that it becomes a natural part of us, and we don't have to pull it out of our memory.

## 8. Less is more

When I talk to very motivated students, they often tell me things like, 'I do 30 minutes of Duolingo a day, 10 minutes of grammar, 10 minutes of flashcards<sup>10</sup>, 20 minutes pronunciation practice...'

They have a very complicated routine for learning a language. **I honestly believe that this is a waste of time.** There is no need to worry about complicated grammar or pronunciation until you are at an advanced level of understanding, which you build through hundreds of hours of reading and listening.

So keep it simple. Stop trying to improve every area at once, and focus on one thing at a time.

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<sup>7</sup> People who live in an area

<sup>8</sup> Books in audio form, books that you listen to

<sup>9</sup> To memorise = to make yourself remember something, to remember something through effort

<sup>10</sup> Flashcards are cards that you can make to memorise things. For example, on one side you write the English word for 'tree', and on the other side you write the French word, and you go through them to test your memory.



## 9. Forget about pronunciation

If you don't listen to 8, at least listen to this: **stop worrying about pronunciation.**

Pronunciation is by far the hardest area of language to improve. Unfortunately, some people are naturally very good at it, and others are not. It's very difficult to fully lose your accent, though.

And that's OK! There's absolutely nothing wrong with having an accent. If people understand you 95% of the time, that's enough. If you *do* want to improve your pronunciation, know that it will take a lot of focussed work, and I really only recommend it to very advanced students.

## 10. You're not the problem

Pretty much every student I speak to says 'People from my country are really bad at learning English.'

Well, it can't be true everywhere, can it? But unfortunately, many students seem to think that *they're* the problem. If only *they* were smarter, worked harder, understood it better, then they would learn more.

But here's the thing: **you've spent most of your life learning languages in an outdated<sup>11</sup> education system that taught you terrible habits.**

The way that languages are taught in most schools actually makes people worse learners, and many people lose so much confidence<sup>12</sup> that they give up on learning a language forever.

So don't be too hard on yourself. If you're listening to *Easy Stories in English* and reading this, you're already doing better than most people! You are a brilliant, important and intelligent person, even if it takes you 5 or 10 years to reach the level of English you want.

Don't tell yourself, 'I'm a bad student.' Tell yourself this: 'My English isn't as good as I want, but I'm working to improve it.'



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I hope you found this advice helpful. If you have any comments on it, or any questions, please send me an email at [Ariel@EasyStoriesInEnglish.com](mailto:Ariel@EasyStoriesInEnglish.com). Best of luck with your learning!

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<sup>11</sup> Out of date, old-fashioned

<sup>12</sup> The feeling that you can do something