

LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IS SIMPLE

Tips from a multilingual biologist



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SELF INTRODUCTION

Don't enjoy studying foreign languages...

But I have to – very few people around speak Bulgarian!

- Studied French at school
 - Fail grade
- Made French-speaking friends at University
 - Got fluent and won a scholarship for study exchange in France
- Started learning English at University, when first went to UK
 - Did study exchanges in English to UK, Austria and Switzerland
- Started studying Japanese 1 year before coming to Japan
 - Could not remember the hiragana!
- Always wanted to learn Spanish, but never did...have to go to Spain?



LANGUAGE IS NATURAL FOR HUMANS

Learning a language is a natural human skill!

Learning a foreign language is not difficult

Then why so many people are so unsuccessful despite so many years of effort?

They study it the wrong way!



THE WRONG WAY

If you want to learn to ride a bicycle
What would you do?

If you want to understand the science of how is it possible to
keep balance on a bike
What would you do?

If you want to learn to drive a car
What would you do?

If you want to understand how car engine works
What would you do?



BY THE WAY

Found two great resources about the physics of bicycles:

<https://www.explainthatstuff.com/bicycles.html>

https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/experimental-study-group/es-010-chemistry-of-sports-spring-2013/lecture-notes/MITES_010S13_lec6.pdf

But neither will help you learn to actually ride a bike!



THE WRONG WAY

The main problem is that we are trying to figure out the physics in order to learn to ride a bike!

You don't need a physics degree to ride a bike!

You don't need an engineering degree to drive a car!

You don't need a linguistics degree to speak a language!



THE WRONG WAY

- Linguistics is an analytical science
It breaks language into pieces, categorizes them,
conceptualizes them, figures out the rules that govern them...
- Breaking things apart is an excellent way to study anything
BUT not to use it
- Biology is also an analytical science – we break living things
apart and figure out how they work...
But you are perfectly fine doing your business of living
without all that knowledge!



THE WRONG WAY

The main reason why so many people struggle with foreign language learning

is because Linguists
have been designing foreign language curricula!

Breaking an engine apart and learning all about it
will not make you much better at driving a car.



THE GOAL

What is your goal when you learn a foreign language?

- To understand everything about the logic of this language?
- To be able to understand people who speak this language?
- To be able to express yourself in this language?



THE GOAL

Learning foreign language strategy depends on your goal:

- If you want to learn all about its grammar?
Go the linguistic way
- If you want to learn to communicate in this language?
Linguistic approach is an obstacle



THE EASY WAY

If you want to USE a foreign language for COMMUNICATION?

Simply approach it as a child!



THE EASY WAY

Here are some strategies that are rarely taught at school:

- 10 things to DO
- 5 things to DO NOT do





DO

1. DO have a reason

- Your brain only works if it has a reason
real emotional personal reason
- Visualize your goal often
See yourself succeeding in your dreams
and it will fuel your reality



DO

- 2. DO accept that you'll be making mistakes
- Making mistakes is inevitable part of learning
- No one was born knowing anything!
It took you ONE YEAR of falling down to learn how to walk!



DO

3. DO find ways to socialize in the new language

- **Language is a social experience!**
Without the social component we have no reason to learn it!
- **Socialize with other non-native speakers!**
This removes major psychological barrier to speaking
("I'm not perfect...")
- **If you want to practice English - go for study exchange to a non-English-speaking country!**



DO

4. DO practice regularly

- ANY new skill require regular practice to build strong neural networks in your brain
- Learning any new skill is not a function of time, it's a function of frequency of practice!
- Schedule the time – ideally every day
Make it simple, easy and enjoyable



DO

5. DO enlist a supportive personal coach
(paid or unpaid)

- Social accountability is a key to success in any new skill
- You need to check on your improvement
and see yourself succeeding



DO

6. DO start with speaking!

- Speaking is the main communication route

and the main motivator!

- Speak with what you know!

Even if you only know 3 words

- Progress into the language from speaking into listening, then reading, and at the end writing.



DO

7. DO focus on role-modeling conversations

- Find (socially appropriate for you) conversation videos
with subtitles

and repeat them aloud



DO

8. DO use your brain natural pattern recognition ability!

- Remember phrase structures instead of grammar rules
- Expose yourself to many images/videos with increasing difficulty of messages and try to figure them out



DO

9. DO focus on pronunciation!

- Language is a sound experience!
- Sounds are made differently in all languages
- Figure out how to move your tongue and lips
to create the basic sounds of the new language!
- Listen to natural speech, read the text and repeat out loud!



DO

10. DO pay attention to the social context

- Language is a social tool,
it's important to use it in a socially appropriate manner
- Example: “Sit down” is “座りなさい”
“Take a seat” is “座ってください”
- Example: Manga Japanese is not daily Japanese!





DON'T

1. DON'T translate

- Associate new words/phrases with images/feelings/actions!

“flower” is directly an image

“花” is directly an image

Your brain thinks in images/feelings, not in words

- Your goal is to start THINKING in the new language – fast



DON'T

2. DON'T use a dictionary or flash cards

- Dictionaries are list of words, like individual LEGO blocks

To make a castle fast you need pre-assembled units!

- Learning language is contextual!
- Build your own PHRASES-based vocabulary linked to meaningful social situations



DON'T

3. DON'T compare grammar with your native language

- Each language is a different planet - with its own rules

Just accept you are on a new planet

and you play by the new rules



DON'T

4. DON'T worry about grammar

Beyond absolute basics, ditch the grammar books

- Express your thoughts as simple as you can



DON'T

4. DON'T study for TOEFL/TOEIC tests

- Passing a test is not the same as successfully communicating in a language
- Unless you really need it, avoid language tests



DON'T

5. DON'T use slang

- Slang is hard to use successfully as beginner

It requires careful context recognition

- You may risk to offend somebody





TO SUM IT UP

Wanna ride a bike? Start practicing! As often as you can.
Forget about the physics!