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## 9 ESSENTIAL FIRST STEPS TO LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

by Brian Powers   January 12, 2015   goal setting



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*“A journey of a thousand miles begins a single step...”*

Or so they claim.

Studying a new language isn't always especially difficult to do in and of itself. Sure, there are hurdles; words you just can't seem to nail down and difficulties managing your time, but in general the *hardest* part of learning a new language is getting started.

It's not so much that it takes a particularly large amount of work. Starting a new language project is difficult because it's hard to *know where* to begin.

To help you know which steps to take I've summarized the bigger items you should bear in mind in order to *start* working towards your language learning goals.

## **1. Look at what you know, and know where you're going**

Unless you randomly woke up one morning with a burning desire to learn Malagasy or Sundanese; chances are you've been thinking about learning this language for at least a little while. *Most* of us know at least a few words in the language we want to learn, sometimes without even realizing it.

For example – as a native English speaker I was shocked to learn *just how many* English words are the same as – or are almost the same as – many French words. This is no surprise if you know anything about the history of the English language, which I did, but until I began studying French it wasn't quite as abundantly clear *just how many* words are cognates – or exactly the same for that matter.

Chances are you already know a little bit about the language you plan to learn – you just need to spend some time dredging these things out of the muck in the back of your brain.

Find a notepad, a whiteboard, or a clay tablet and a chisel, and write (or inscribe) all of the words and phrases from your target language that you already know. You don't need to remember everything – just enough to give yourself a fair idea of what you've got already. Chances are that as you go you'll remember more than you expected.

Knowing where you are – even before you've really begun – will help you to plot a course to language victory. Simply knowing how much you already know can boost your confidence and make it easier to take those first few steps.

## 2. Commitment

In all likelihood nobody is holding a gun to your head while you furiously scribble your new language on a blackboard. Sticking with your project, staying interested, staying focused and making progress are *all on you*. Which kind of sucks.

It can be hard to maintain the same interest you had in anything – let alone a language – a year ago. It goes beyond simply being motivated. It's easy to *want* something, but it's also easy to lose sight of it when other aspects of life get in the way. When procrastination becomes a habit you're in trouble.

Your commitment to your project, just as with anything, will determine its outcome; be it negative or positive. Try to think of ways that you can keep yourself on track as you go. Simply saying "I will learn a language" isn't always enough to keep you on the straight and narrow, so think of some strategies to help keep yourself committed over the course of what is likely to be a long journey.

Stick with LATG! I'll do what I can to help keep you motivated to the best of my ability.

## 3. Assess how you learn best

There are language learning tips, tricks, tools and strategies for just about everyone and every budget. Some people are naturally better at note taking while some prefer to sit still and absorb new vocabulary from an audio course. Some prefer the classroom experience and others abhor the idea.

If you can – think back to your days in school. What worked and didn't work? Were you a student who studied hard, or maybe not so much? Did you excel when under pressure?

When it comes to learning a new language you are going to be at your best when you're playing to your strengths. It can be hard to know what these are though. If you aren't sure how you learn I would strongly recommend using a [diverse selection of tools](#) – at least at first – to test the waters, get your feet wet and try to figure out not only what seems to be an effective tool, but also an engaging one that suits your current needs.

## 4. Primary and secondary strategies

As with any journey or major project it pays to plan ahead. Hopefully by now you've already determined what your goals are and how you learn best making it time to decide how to move forward with your project.

If you've already learned a second language in the past do you remember which methods you enjoyed and benefited from the most? If so this is where you want to begin.

If not, don't worry about it too much, it's not too hard to plot your course.



In order to figure this out we're going to use what I like to call *primary* and *secondary* language learning strategies.

- **Primary** strategies are, put simply, *bigger*, more complete language tools that offer a broader spectrum of language instruction. They can be used as a sort of “flagship” strategy for learning a new language. Some examples of primary strategies are private lessons with a tutor, The Pimsleur Approach or Rocket Languages. These programs will – at least for a time – carry the bulk of your learning.

These strategies tend to include multiple facets of language learning including reading, writing, listening, speaking and sentence construction.

- **Secondary** language strategies are supplemental and unlike primaries tend to focus on a single facet. I wouldn't advise that a learner use these as their main methods of learning as much as tools to find reading material, fine-tune recall and build vocabulary. Some examples of secondary strategies are [Memrise](#), Anki and [FlashSticks](#).

Secondary strategies are no less important than primaries – in fact you could argue that they are more important. It is essential to remember that they won't usually float you to fluency all on their own. They must be used in tandem with one or more primaries.

Anyway, with that out of the way, I recommend first choosing a *primary* strategy. Not all of them are good, and finding one that works best for you could be tricky, but I tend to recommend [The Pimsleur Approach](#) for first time learners beginning a new language.

To read more about the specifics of primary and secondary strategies [check out this post](#).

## 5. Creating an immersion environment

Despite what many companies and services claim, creating a true immersion environment is next to impossible. If a mobile app is trying to convince you that you can use it to learn via immersion – it's lying, that's ridiculous.

True immersion usually means spending time – even a short time – *living* in a country or neighborhood that speaks, primarily, the language you're learning. Studying abroad is probably the classic example of *true* immersion.

But we can't all study abroad and we can't just up and visit anywhere we'd like. That would get way too expensive way too fast and we have lives that require us to do *things* that aren't necessarily language related, or particularly fun.

Instead we have to create for ourselves a *simulated* immersion environment. It's *definitely* not the same thing, but we'll do our best to use what we have.

For brevity's sake I'll skip the details here, but you can [check out this recent post](#) for tips and tricks for creating your personal language immersion environment.

## 6. Find a partner; or two...

The most important part of learning a language – unless your goal is simply to attain literacy – is speaking.

That is – speaking and listening to a real person. This is also probably the hardest part.

It's easier if you can find a friend or family member early on and learn along with them. You

should also be using tutors or classroom settings if possible to communicate with native or more advanced speakers, but for now just concentrate on finding a friend interested in learning with you.

Sometimes an element of competition can help keep me motivated and progressing at a decent rate, and simply having the support of someone you know can go a long way.

Not having much luck finding a friend? Try running a quick search on Facebook for *groups* that pertain specifically to your language. There are usually dozens – some of them huge – for all major languages, and often many for less commonly studied languages as well. Not a fan of that idea? Here are a few other ways to find a

[Google+](#) also has a group/community feature loaded with individuals looking for new people to learn from and with.

Not a fan of that idea? [Here are a few other ways](#) to find a language partner.

There's almost always someone in the same boat as you looking for a study-buddy.

## 7. The essential freebies

Language learning *should not* cost you an arm and a leg. So many people think it takes professional classroom courses, expensive software like Rosetta Stone or a trip overseas that it makes my head spin.

There are dozens of fantastic free language learning materials available to anyone willing to look for them. Or poke around this site.

The big ones you *need* to be using are [Memrise](#), [Duolingo](#) and [Lingua.ly](#). These three *secondary* resources, used together often form a rigid backbone upon which I like to build my own language projects. Coupled with a (paid) primary strategy like Pimsleur and some Skyping it's hard to go wrong.

You can [check out this list](#) for a collection of some of the better freebies you can and *should* be taking advantage of no matter how advanced your language skills.

## 8. Maintaining motivation and meeting goals

If you lose interest in your language project – you’re done. It’s all over. This makes setting and reaching short term goals one of the most important things you can do.

Your motivation is clearly going to make the difference between what is “easy” and what is “hard” about the language you’ve chosen to study.

Of the many ways to keep yourself motivated, one of the best is to actually *meet your short term goals*. I’ve written [this post here](#) to explain how to set and maintain appropriate SMART objectives that allow you to visualize your progress – something I personally need to see in order to maintain drive in my own pursuits.

If I don’t feel like I’m making any progress – I steadily stop trying. Progress is nearly always made by those who try and the amount is less important than perpetuating the will to continue.

## 9. Start using your language

What good is it if you never use it?

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When you set out on this journey to study, learn and master a second language you did so for a *reason*. There is no clear line, no border between proficiency and the lack thereof.

Knowledge of a language is an infinite slope with a base but no summit. If you wait until you’ve passed the treeline of your lingual mountain to start *experiencing* your language you’ll have missed the opportunity to see the beauty hiding in the forest below.

It takes only the mastery of a few simple phrases, of the most basic greetings and niceties to *start* communicating and doing so is only as difficult as you make it out to be.

Once you begin using your new tongue you will start to realize that it doesn’t matter if you can sit through a French geochemistry lecture, or find work as a Russian auctioneer – you’re *already a speaker* of the language. It is that realization that will open the floodgates to further communication, increased proficiency and that job as a Tokyo sushi chef you’ve always dreamt of finding.

## Conclusion

Reaching your long term goals and finding the level of proficiency you've always seen yourself with is difficult – there's no point in lying to ourselves about it.

Language learning is like the evolution of aviation. The hardest part is getting your wood and cloth biplane off of the ground and keeping it in the air – or maintaining the willingness to try again until it stays there.

Gradually the wings become made of something more durable, the propellers come off, jet engines are added, barriers are broken, new heights achieved and eventually from the loftiest altitudes of multilingualism you can look down on the world from a new vantage point, with a different, global perspective.

It's worth it. You just have to start.



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