



The Mezzofanti Guild
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10 ^{No BS} Answers

to the most common

FAQ's

ABOUT

Language
LEARNING





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G'day!

Thanks for signing up to The Mezzofanti Guild.



Here you'll find straight-to-the-point, no BS answers to 10 of the most frequently asked questions about language learning. Where an answer requires a much longer explanation you'll find links back to the original articles I've published online.

You're welcome to share and print this content as long as you leave it in its original form and credit the guy who put it together. :)

Best of luck with your language learning goals!

- Donovan Nagel, MA Applied Linguistics

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Donovan Nagel'.

1

IS IT POSSIBLE TO LEARN MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE AT THE SAME TIME?

As you should with any language learning endeavor, make an honest assessment of your reasons for wanting to do it.

Why do you want to learn more than one language at the same time?

Let me start off by saying that it is absolutely better to focus on **one** at a time as with *any* skill for the simple reason that you can devote more time and attention to it.

And this is precisely how you should view languages – as *skills*.

Just as you can learn two musical instruments at the same time or learn to play two different sports, learning two languages is entirely feasible.

However!

If you've got terrible time management skills then that's something you need to sort out before trying to learn a language, let alone several languages.

Learning one language requires an enormous commitment on your part – hours, days, weeks, months... even years. We're not just talking about study either – we're talking about all the social demands and cultural assimilation that are part and parcel of learning a language properly.

These things take time!

There can in fact be benefits to learning more than one language at a time.

For one, the multiple languages you're learning may have **cognates** (same words) or other similar grammatical features to each other which in turn will help you speed up acquisition of both (e.g. French and Italian).

When you go through periods of boredom or fatigue with one language (it happens to everybody), instead of not being productive at all or giving up you've got your other languages to focus on for a while. Sometimes I find the best motivator for language study is to study an entirely different language.

At the end of the day as I said it's all about **time management**.

It's going to take you a lot of time and hard work to learn a language so be realistic about whether or not you can handle two or more simultaneously.

Make sure to read [this article](#) as well.



2

AM I TOO OLD TO LEARN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

One of the most common excuses used by people not trying to learn a foreign language is that they're *too old*.

"It's easier for kids."

Let me tell you – nothing could be further from the truth.

First of all, think of the frustration a young child must have when they want to get a point across to their parents but are unable to.

They have *no* other language to fall back on like you do.

It takes children years to achieve what an adult is capable of doing in a much shorter period of time for the simple fact that we already have the ability to communicate and we also have the ability to read and study what we need.

Adults have a **serious advantage** over children in so many ways.

Children appear to do this effortlessly but in actual fact they make tonnes of mistakes as well and are always struggling to get their point across.

There are some experts who talk about the brains of children being physically more able to acquire languages and the existence of what they call a *Critical Period* of age where we're much more likely to succeed at foreign language learning but these are only theories and not unanimously agreed on by experts.

There are countless examples of adults picking up new languages and many who have reached *near-native* level fluency in those languages.

Be encouraged!

Your age is not a disadvantage.



3

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BECOME FLUENT IN JUST A FEW MONTHS?

Everyone interprets the word *fluent* differently.

In fact it's probably the most misused and misunderstood word in language learning discussion. It's an easy word to throw around but very hard for most people to define if you ask them to!

Some people define it as being able to talk about advanced level topics whereas others would regard much more basic skills as being fluent.

It means **neither** of these.

Fluency is a *spectrum* – not an end state.

The moment you start learning a foreign language, you're somewhere on that spectrum of fluency.

So to talk about *being fluent in a few months*, the better question is **how fluent are you** not **are you fluent?**

As for *how fluent* a person can be in just a few months, it depends first and foremost on a range of factors such as how similar the language is to your own, how much time and practice you put into it, and your motivation.

You certainly won't be able to discuss advanced level topics or have a strong grasp of the language in such a short time but it is possible to communicate at a basic level about familiar topics.

The biggest challenge is actually not your speaking skills believe it or not but rather your level of listening comprehension (see here) which I call *the one aspect of foreign language learning that you can't bullshit* since it takes us all serious time to improve and there are no shortcuts.

I'd encourage you to watch [this video here](#) where I explain the topic of *fluency* in detail.



4

IS ROSETTA STONE WORTH THE MONEY?

On the topic of language learning, Rosetta Stone is without a doubt one of the most (if not *the* most) searched for terms on search engines and in language learning forums.

It's a household name. People **know** it.

The problem is it has a notorious reputation for its price (it usually sells for several hundred dollars a pop) which leads people to assume that it *must* be either excellent or a scam with such a high price tag.

Neither of those conclusions are necessarily true.

A while back I wrote [this article](#) where I set out to examine and comment on the RS approach and its content from a completely non-biased, non-financially-motivated point of view. What I discovered and demonstrated in that review is that Rosetta Stone does in fact use a very sound, research-based approach to teaching languages naturally and it is in fact a useful piece of software as long as you don't approach it expecting [grammar](#) to be explicitly explained to you.

Ultimately, it's your own expectations and understanding of how languages should be taught which will determine whether or not RS is worth your time and money.

What's important for you to know however is that for the cost of a Rosetta Stone package you could get the following which would be a much better use of your money:

- **40 to 50 personalized, student-directed, one-on-one lessons with a native speaker via [italki](#) (approx. \$10-12 an hour).**
- **20 in-person, private lessons with a language instructor in your own area (usually approx. \$25-30 an hour).**
- **Several return flights to another European destination on a low-budget airline and a week or two in cheap accommodation to practice.**
- **For people in the US or Australia, it covers a lot of the cost for a budget trip to Latin America or South East Asia for practice.**
- **Almost any book or audio course on the market which are usually priced anywhere between \$30 to \$100 (combine it with other inexpensive products like [Earworms MBT](#), [Glossika GSR](#) or even [Rocket Languages](#)).**

I'd encourage you to read the full review [here](#) and keep in mind that RS is not a bad product even though it does have a few negative marks against it (some of its language editions are much better than others).



5

I'M REALLY NERVOUS ABOUT SPEAKING. HOW DO I OVERCOME THIS?

First things first.

You will never, **ever** learn to speak a foreign language properly without being a sociable person (please [read this article](#) where I explain exactly what this word means).

Period. *Full stop.* **End of story.**

Language serves as a bridge between two or more people, whether it's written or spoken and it's nurtured through our interaction with other human beings. So many people never become fluent speakers of another language because they don't grasp (and put into practice) this simple truth.

Language is a social thing.

Because of this it's essential that you don't cave in to shyness and fear of what other people may be thinking.

I promise you – nearly every single person you speak to is **not** judging you or making fun of you. In all probability they're delighted to see you trying.

Overcoming these fears is about constantly reminding yourself of this truth.

Some of us do have crippling social anxieties which hold us back – even for the sociably-inclined.

For me personally this manifests in the workplace if I'm teaching while being observed by my boss or co-workers. I'm a great teacher normally but I struggle to perform well under that kind of pressure.

Many people dread public speaking. Others I've spoken to have a similar kind of fear from simply talking to strangers in public. Whatever the severity of your shyness or social anxiety is, the truth of the matter is that the only way you're going to beat it is to face it.

I don't like heights at all and planes used to scare the hell out of me but the more I travel the easier it gets. Keep confronting those fears and fix your mind on how quickly you'll improve as a speaker by meeting people.

Cast aside any silly thoughts about people judging you for making mistakes (because they aren't!) and be on a daily mission to interact with new people in your target language.



6

I STUDIED A LANGUAGE IN SCHOOL. CAN I GET IT BACK?

Do we gradually forget languages?

What happened to the foreign languages we learned in school?
Are they lost and can we pick them up again quickly if they are?

Most of us took a foreign language in school and yet the common complaint is that few of us can remember it. I studied Mandarin Chinese for about 5 years in school for example but I can't recall most of it as an adult.

Here's the honest, fact-of-the-matter truth why this is:

If you can't remember any of the language that you studied in school then it's likely that **you *never* learned it well in the first place.**

That's right. You didn't learn it well enough to begin with otherwise it wouldn't be such a challenge to blow the dust off and speak it again.

This sounds like an overly bold assertion but I'd encourage you to read an article I wrote on why this is the case [here](#).

The good news is that for many of us when we do go back and study a language that we learned many years ago in school but 'forgot', we realize that a lot of it is in fact still there or at least very familiar.

So although we aren't able to remember how to speak it, a lot of the foundation work that we did (core grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.) gives a big head start for jumping back into it as adults.

The thing is - you won't notice this until you [start](#).



7

WHICH LANGUAGE SHOULD I LEARN?

I'm sure that most of the people reading this have already made up their minds about which language they want or need to learn.

Yet you might be surprised that it's one of the most frequently asked questions in online forums.

Most people *want* to speak a foreign language.

Let me be straightforward about this – it's not a question that anyone other than yourself can really answer. There are so many interesting languages out there and every one of them has a compelling reason to learn it but it depends entirely on where YOUR interests and needs lie.

If you're just learning a language *on a whim* then forget it.

Your chance of succeeding in the long term is very low if you don't have some kind of emotional investment in it or a genuine necessity such as living in the country or work.

Try this:

Picture yourself 6 months, 1 year, or a few years down the track and answer honestly whether or not you'd still have the same passion and motivation to keep going with the language you want to learn.

If you can't answer that with certainty then it might not be the right choice.



8

IS IT POSSIBLE TO LEARN TO SPEAK A LANGUAGE ON MY OWN?

This question gets asked quite a lot by people and I believe it's usually for one of two reasons:

1. Either you don't have any native speakers to practice with in person or [online](#).
2. or you have social anxiety and are trying to avoid speaking to people.

Let's be realistic – *what is the point of learning to speak a foreign language if you want to avoid speaking to people?*

Doesn't make a whole lot of sense (I'm talking about spoken languages here).

As I said in #5 languages are a social thing so if lack of sociability is the problem then it's something you need to address.

Not having anyone to practice with on the other hand is a common problem that a lot of us have (especially for people who live in remote areas or who are learning minority languages with few speakers).

I've been in this situation myself.

I taught myself Irish for 9 months in isolation before flying all the way from Australia to Ireland where I pretty much conversed for the first time.

Because I'd spent so much time using listening and reading material without actually speaking, I found that when I arrived in Ireland I could understand **a lot** but my speaking skills were far below my comprehension level.

So we are very limited in how much we can improve in isolation as speakers but we can use that time effectively to improve our comprehension skills (reading and listening).

When it does come time to speak with people we can expect our speaking skills to be lagging behind significantly but since so much foundational work has been done we can bring these skills up quite rapidly.

In saying that, I would never recommend *not* speaking to people if the option is there.



9

I CAN'T UNDERSTAND PEOPLE. HOW DO I IMPROVE MY COMPREHENSION?

One of the most difficult parts about learning a new language is [listening comprehension](#) (being able to grasp and make sense of what you hear). You can be an excellent speaker and be able to read really well yet still not understand more than a fraction of what other people are saying.

The reason for this is that speech is a series of sound units that are connected together quickly when spoken by a native speaker and they're difficult to distinguish with an untrained ear.

There's no shortcut around this unfortunately.

The only way we train our ears to distinguish sounds in foreign speech is by lots and lots of exposure. Listen, listen and listen some more - and this takes time.

You need to have a lot of exposure to native speaker conversation in order to get better at it.

It's important to remember that **speaking practice** improves listening skills as well as speaking skills.

I've never really been one to agree with long silent periods of learning before being ready to speak – eventually you're going to have to speak to people and make mistakes so it's better to start early!

This not only makes you a better speaker but will constantly challenge you to understand what's being said to or asked of you (hence improving your listening).

One reason why speaking to other people is beneficial to your listening comprehension skills is that native speakers will naturally dumb down and slow down their speech for new learners, as well as using gestures, facial expressions and so on that help us put two and two together when we're trying to understand.

These helpful cues are like *training wheels* for listening comprehension so don't underestimate their importance.

As you get better and better you'll find yourself understanding and responding to fast, natural speech and it's at this point that the training wheels come off.



10

DO I HAVE TO STUDY GRAMMAR?

What if I told you that you *don't* need to study [grammar](#) to learn to speak a foreign language?

It's **entirely possible** and in fact more natural to become conversational in a language without ever sitting down to memorize rules and conjugation tables.

This is a fact that flies in the face of a whole world of failed classroom methodologies for foreign language instruction and misconceptions among learners about the way in which we acquire language.

One of the main reasons why so many education systems around the world are failing to produce students who can speak a foreign language properly (even at an elementary level) is their strong emphasis on learning grammar as a foundation to speaking.

You didn't become a fluent speaker of your own language by studying its grammar.

Around the time you began studying grammar in school you were already a fluent speaker of your native language. You knew how to use verbs in different tenses before you even knew what a verb was.

Now, before you start bringing up the 'adults aren't the same as kids' argument, please [read this article](#) that I wrote on the topic which will explain why this is relevant.

So how are languages learned without grammar study then?

The languages we speak are just a collection of **unoriginal chunks** that we plug in a bit like linguistic lego blocks to form new sentences. These can be single words, expressions or whole sentences.

We hear them so much in our first language that we're able to piece them together by [habit](#) and recognize what sounds right and what doesn't. The good news for you is it can be done in your second language as well.

I explain and demonstrate this in detail [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) so be sure to check it out.



Where to from here?

1. Please 'Like' the [Facebook page](#) so you can stay updated and join in discussions.
2. Join the [Forum](#) to introduce yourself and ask/answer questions.
3. Make an account on [italki](#) if you haven't already.
4. Follow me on [Twitter](#).
5. Support this site by sharing this book and the articles it links to with friends of yours on social media (e.g. Facebook) who may find them useful or interesting.

Thanks!

[How Languages Are Learned](#) (4th Edition) by Patsy Lightbown

If you're interested in a great book that gives an easy-to-read overview on the many theories of how languages are learned then I recommend this one.

