

## Fast-tracking Foreign Languages: How to Meet the Linguistic Challenges of Working Abroad

by Philip Yaffe

Native English-speakers are increasingly exhorted to learn foreign languages to play a more effective role in globalisation. However, we tend not to learn foreign languages for three very valid reasons.

1. Many other peoples in the world are not just exhorted to learn English, they are required to do so. Thus, you can find English virtually everywhere you go.
2. The grammar of most other languages, certainly most European languages, is much more complex than English. Thus, native anglophones often view language learning as a daunting, and even demoralising task.
3. Most native anglophones, especially in North America, live in almost exclusively English-speaking environments. We virtually never hear other languages spoken live, on radio or television, and virtually never see them written in newspapers, magazines, books, etc. This is hardly motivating.

The fact is, the world conspires against anglophones learning other languages. So if you speak only English, you have no reason to be ashamed.

Nevertheless, whilst these factors explain why so few anglophones know other languages, they are not valid excuses for not learning them when the situation calls for it. For example, you are sent to open or manage a foreign subsidiary, you are assigned to negotiate or maintain working relationships with a foreign partner, etc.

How should you go about learning a foreign language with the least pain and most gain? *In my personal experience, the secret lies in changing your mindset.*

I live in Brussels. I speak French fluently, understand and can more-or-less get around in Dutch and German, and I am now rapidly acquiring Spanish. But the first language I mastered was none of these. It was Swahili, which I learned when I spent two-and-a-half years working in Tanzania.

Like many (probably most) Americans growing up in an essentially English-speaking environment, I thought the ability to speak another language required superior intelligence; only people endowed with this unique talent could actually achieve it. Shortly after I got to Tanzania, I visited in a remote tribal area where virtually everyone spoke three languages. Moreover, virtually none of them had ever seen the inside of a school (there just weren't any schools), let alone graduated from a prestigious university (UCLA).

I therefore had to radically rethink my attitude towards language learning. This new mindset has significantly helped me master the languages I now regularly use. I will illustrate with French, the language I know best. But remember, these same ideas and techniques apply to virtually any language you may need to acquire.

### Some Useful Psychology

The good news is: Learning to speak a language is the easiest part of the job.

I know you may have thought that speaking would be the most difficult part. However, I would argue that most people, with minimal effort, can learn to speak a foreign language reasonably well really quite quickly.

Writing a language is very a different story. French, for example, is one of the most complex written languages in the world. In fact, written French and spoken French are almost two separate languages. Therefore, if your objective is to speak, *concentrate on the spoken language and leave the written language to come along later.*

I know this may sound like heresy, because the majority of language courses try to teach both at the same time, particularly in public schools. They spend a demoralising amount of time making you write a language (probably because it is easier to grade students this way), although this is the last thing you really need to know.

When I say that speaking is the easiest part of the job, I am not advocating "total immersion". Few of us have the luxury of spending a week, or preferably several weeks, totally concentrating on learning a language. What I am advocating is doing things in the proper psychological order.

Most people can master enough of the fundamentals to be able to speak (poorly but nevertheless coherently), and to understand what is being said to them, within only 2 - 3 months. The trick is to recognise that the major obstacle to acquiring a foreign language is not grammar. **It's vocabulary.**

If you don't know the verb you need, it doesn't matter that you know how to conjugate verbs; you still cannot speak. If you don't know the adjective you need, it doesn't matter that you know how to decline adjectives; you still cannot speak. And so on.

I therefore suggest that the most effective order for learning a language would be:

1. **Basic grammar**

The minimum necessary to put together an intelligible (if incorrect) sentence. In my experience, this is most efficiently done self-taught. Sit down with a grammar book for about 10-15 minutes each day until you begin to feel somewhat comfortable with it.

2. **Basic vocabulary**

The minimum necessary to begin using the basic grammar. Again, in my experience this is most efficiently done self-taught, i.e. the classic "learn five new words each day". It won't be very long before you start seeing how different words are related, so you can begin to guess what new words mean without resorting to the dictionary.

**Speaking the language**

Putting basic grammar and vocabulary to work as soon as you can actually begin using them. This is the time to consider a language school or a personal tutor. With the foundation of what you will have already learned by yourself, you will certainly progress more easily and rapidly than if you had leapt into formal language instruction at the very beginning.

**Writing the language**

You will almost certainly never need to do much writing. And what you do write will certainly need to be revised and corrected by a native speaker.

Since vocabulary is crucial, then the largely unrecognised key to mastering another language is: **Learn to read it.**

There is nothing like being able to sit down with a newspaper, magazine, or even a novel in the language to reinforce both grammar and vocabulary. The more you read, the more your vocabulary will expand. And the more some of the language's apparently bizarre ways of doing things will become increasingly familiar.

best results, the novel should contain a maximum of dialogue and a minimum of description. With dialogue, you can frequently anticipate and interpret what the characters are saying; with description you haven't a clue.

When I was learning French, I used novels by Agatha Christie and the adventures of *Tarzan* by Edgar Rice Burroughs, because they are about 90% dialogue and 10% description. Hardly my favourite literature, but they served the purpose. I would also suggest *Animal Farm* by George Orwell and *Candide* by Voltaire. However, any novel with a high ratio of dialogue to description will do.

**Important Tip**

The purpose of reading in the language is to learn vocabulary **automatically**. Constantly looking up unfamiliar words will break your reading rhythm and damage your enjoyment. *Consequently, keep use of a dictionary to an absolute minimum.*

It isn't heresy to say this, just common sense.

In fiction, very few words are crucial for understanding the story line. Do you really need to know precisely what a room looks like? It's enough to know that is large and elegantly furnished. Do you really need to know precisely what a landscape looks like? It is enough to know that it is isolated and windy.

Moreover, words repeat. You will certainly see an unfamiliar word many more times throughout the text. At least one of those times, the way it is used will tell you exactly what it means, with no effort at all.

As a rule of thumb, if you are using a dictionary more than 2 - 3 times a page, you are probably being too fastidious. Stop it. Just read and enjoy!

Once you arrive on site where the language is spoken, all the grammar and vocabulary you have stored up in this way will rapidly show its worth.

In my case, this occurred only a very few weeks after landing in Tanzania. At the beginning, I was speaking by translating through English. However, one magic day I suddenly realised that I was no longer translating through English. I was speaking in Swahili directly. It was like being released from prison. Although this happened more than 40 years ago, the picture of my cell door flying open and my mind flying free is as vivid now as the day it happened. It's an experience not to be missed!

Having discovered that I could really speak a foreign language - *and that I didn't have to be a genius to do it* - I tried to determine how it had happened. I came to the conclusion that the single most important psychological factor is resignation.

Different languages have different ways of doing things, some of which will seem quite absurd. It is useless to keep moaning: "Why do they speak in this ridiculous way when it is so much easier to do it the way we do it in English?"

Whatever it is you find so annoying: Don't fight it; accept it.

This is how children learn languages. They don't constantly question grammatical structures, because it would just never occur to them to do so. And we all know how much more easily and rapidly "naïve" children learn languages than do we "sophisticated" adults!

### **Three Fundamental Principles**

With Swahili as a basis, I also tried to determine the fundamental principles of language learning that could help me go on to mastering others. I found three to be particularly useful.

**Facility Principle**  
**What you don't have to do is always**  
**easier than what you do have to do.**

In other words, the less you have to think about in learning a language, the more rapidly you will learn it. And the fewer mistakes you will make. As I will demonstrate below, French has certain features and characteristics that make it dramatically easier than English. Take advantage of them.

Here is the second principle that can smooth your way.

**Familiarity Principle**  
**Familiar habits and patterns of thought**  
**are often hard to break.**

Paradoxically, some of the aspects where another language is easier than English at first glance appear unfamiliar - *and therefore falsely difficult*. Although it may take you some time to accept them, once you begin to *think in the language*, you will rapidly come to appreciate them and enjoy their benefits.

Here is an anecdote to illustrate the point.

One time I was talking with a Dutch-speaking friend. He agreed that English is fundamentally simpler than his own language; nevertheless, he complained that he just couldn't get used to English's simpler sentence structure. In certain instances, Dutch grammar requires the order of the words in the sentence to reverse; this never happens in English. Objectively, then, English sentence structure should be easier than Dutch. But to him, not reversing the word order just didn't seem natural.

Here is a third principle you will find extremely useful.

**Context Principle**  
**By themselves, words and sentences**  
**have little meaning; often they can**  
**be understood only in relation to**  
**other words and sentences.**

This is very reassuring. It means that even if you say something incorrectly, in general people will still understand you because of the context in which you say it. Likewise, even if people say something to you using unfamiliar grammar or vocabulary, in general you will still be able to understand them because of the context in which they say it.

***In short, you don't have to approach perfection in a language in order to use it effectively.***

#### **Focus on Simplicities, not Complexities**

To conclude, let me fulfil the promise I made to demonstrate that French has certain features and characteristics that make it dramatically easier than English. This is equally true of most other languages, regardless of how difficult they may seem at first. ***The important thing is to focus on the simplicities, not the complexities.***

Here are just seven examples; I could cite many more.

#### **1. No tonic accent**

Most people are largely unaware of how seriously difficult their own native language could be to a foreigner. As a native speaker, you probably find that English is quite easy to pronounce. *But the fact is, French is even easier.*

What! With its nasalisation, trilled "r" and other difficult sounds? Absolutely!

First, it is important to understand that **no sounds, in any language, are inherently difficult to pronounce.** If they were, they wouldn't exist because the native speakers would never have accepted them in the first place.

2. Learning to pronounce unfamiliar foreign sounds is never easy. Francophones learning English have a terrible time pronouncing the "th" sound in words such as "the", "they", "through", "throw", etc., because there is no French equivalent. But they do it reasonably well. Just as you may have difficulty with certain French sounds that have no English equivalents. But you can also do it.
3. Where French pronunciation has an undeniable advantage over English is its virtual lack of a "tonic accent". Tonic accent simply means that certain syllables are given more stress than are others. For example, "difficult" is pronounced "**dif**-fi-cult"; the first syllable carries the tonic accent. It could just as easily be pronounced dif-**fi**-cult, or even dif-fi-**cult**". Technically, the tonic accent does exist in French, but it is very hard to hear it. For example, in English we say "**rest**-au-rant; there is a distinct stress on the first syllable. In French, this is "rest-au-rant", with no stress anywhere. Likewise, "con--**ven**-tion" has a distinct stress on the second syllable. In French, this is simply "con-ven-tion", with no stress. And so on for every word in the language.

Thus, you never have to guess where the tonic accent should go, **so you can never make a mistake.**

You have grown up with the tonic accent, so you might not immediately recognise what a problem it really is, even between native speakers. Britons, for example, like to say "con-**tro**-ver-sy" whilst Americans prefer to say "con-**con**-tro-ver-sy". And sometimes they don't understand each other because of this difference. Britons say "**gar**-age" whilst Americans say gar-**age**", again with the possibility of misunderstanding. And so on. In French, there is no tonic accent, so this problem simply doesn't exist.

#### **4. Gallic Impersonality**

5. **A. Use of "on"**

6. For anglophones, imbued with the idea that French is a very personal language (the so-called "language of love"), few things are more surprising than the frequent use of the very impersonal "on" (pronounced *ohn*). By contrast, francophones learning English are surprised to discover that English has no equivalent of "on", so they have to search all over the place for substitutes.

Actually, this is not entirely true. English does have an equivalent, "one", but it is seldom used. The Queen of England uses it: "One has considered the matter carefully" rather than "I have considered the matter carefully". Moralists use it: "One should not kill", "One should be ready to fight for one's country", etc.

French uses "on" without the slightest embarrassment. In fact, using it prevents a lot of embarrassment. For example, a key problem in English is avoiding "genderism". This is the explanation for the very odd use of the plural pronoun "they" as if it were a singular. Example: If someone studies hard, **they** will succeed. Why do we make this apparently illogical switch from the singular pronoun "someone" and the singular verb "studies" to the plural pronoun "they"? Because otherwise, it would have been necessary to say "**he** will succeed". However, the sentence clearly is not directed only to males. Alternatively, it would have been necessary to say "**he** or **she** will succeed", or "**he/she** will succeed", which are cumbersome. French has no such problem, because "on" (one) is the universal solution.

**B. Use of possessive adjectives**

Here is another example of how Gallic impersonality avoids genderism. Consider the sentence: "Everyone who studies hard will see **their** effort rapidly rewarded." We start the sentence with a singular subject and verb; however, we finish it with a plural possessive adjective ("their"). In French, the sentence remains singular all the way through, because there is no gender distinction. "*Son effort*" can mean either "his effort" or "her effort", according to the context. Thus, the inherently impersonal nature of French grammar automatically precludes a lot of "political incorrectness". In English, we can achieve this only through some rather illogical and inelegant grammatical contortions.

7. **Use of infinitives**

A major problem French speakers (and most other Europeans) face in English is the correct use of infinitives. As a native speaker, you probably never realised that infinitives can be a problem. After all, an infinitive is just an infinitive. Well, not quite. English infinitives are in fact very unusual compared to French infinitives. This is because French infinitives are unified, whilst English infinitives are separable. For example:

1. **French:** manger (-er marks the infinitive)
2. **English:** to eat

The French infinitive is always a single word; however, the English infinitive can be used with both parts or only the second part. The problem is, in many cases this is not optional, but required. For example: "I need to eat something" (both parts), but "I must eat something" (only second part). So what's the difference? Why in the first example is the "to" necessary and in the second not only isn't it necessary, using it would be quite incorrect?

In French, this problem never arises. "J'ai besoin de **manger** quelque chose" (I need to eat something) and "Je dois **manger** quelque chose" (I must eat something). Simple, isn't it. Just imagine if French worked like English. You would constantly be making choices about which form of the infinitive to use - *and in many cases you would be wrong*.

8. **Use of definite articles**

Use of the definite article ("the") in English presents pretty much the same problem as use of the infinitive. In other words, you must always be making choices about when to use it and when not to use it. French is much simpler.

Really! Doesn't French have three definitive articles (*le, la, les*) compared to only one in English? Absolutely! But the problem is not deciding which definite article to use. Rather, it is deciding whether or not to use any definitive article at all.

In French, you retain the definite article much more frequently than you do in English. Thus, you have considerably fewer decisions to make, and therefore considerably fewer opportunities to make a mistake.

#### Example

1. "I like cats" (cats in general)
2. "I like the cats" (specific cats, not necessarily all cats)

In French, both statements are rendered "J'aime **les** chats", so no decision about whether or not to use the definite article. You distinguish the meanings of the two sentences from the context in which they are used, not their grammatical form.

#### 9. No distinction between "a" and "one"

The words "a" and "one" are the equivalent of "un" in French. Fundamentally, these two words mean the same thing; however, "one" is more precise, so it adds emphasis. For example:

1. I saw a Chinese film (*at least one, perhaps more*)
2. I saw one Chinese film (*only one, no more*)

Both of these sentences are rendered in French as "J'ai vu **un** film chinois." As with the definite article, you distinguish the meaning from the context.

Many francophones speaking English frequently make the mistake of saying "I have eaten in one Japanese restaurant" when they really mean "I have eaten in a Japanese restaurant". As an anglophone speaking French, you will never make this mistake, *because it simply isn't possible!*

#### 10. Simple & progressive (continuous) tenses

English makes frequent use of progressive (continuous) verb tenses, whilst French almost never does.

The progressive tenses are formed by two verbs: the helper (auxiliary) "to be" and the "present participle" (-ing form) of the other one. **Example:** She is eating.

English uses progressive tenses to distinguish between the general time period during which an action takes place and the exact moment that the action takes place. French generally does not make this distinction. "Elle **mange**" means either "she eats" or "she is eating". Once again, French leaves interpretation of the correct meaning to context.

And once again, since there is only one grammatical form, *there is no possibility of error!*

#### 11. Converting verbs into nouns

Because of its fondness for progressive verb tenses, English has a characteristic way of converting verbs into nouns, i.e. using a verb as the subject or the object of a sentence. In French, and many other languages, you simply use the infinitive: **Marcher** est bon pour les poumons. You can do the same thing in English: **To walk** is good for the lungs. However, the preferred form is: **Walking** is good for the lungs. To anglophone ears, "walking" is more dynamic than "to walk", i.e. it seems to give a better picture of what is happening. This may very well be the case - *in English*. But there is no such distinction in French. So once again, *there is no way of making a mistake!*

Admittedly, learning another language is never easy; it takes time, energy and dedication. However, as we have seen, there are three powerful strategies you can use to make the job considerably easier.

- **Focus** on the simplicities of the other language rather than on its complexities.

**Channel** your energies according to the best psychological order:

1. Basic grammar
  2. Basic vocabulary
  3. Speaking the language
  4. Writing the language
  - 5.
- **Concentrate** on reading the language to comfortably and automatically master its grammar and vocabulary

Good luck! Bonne chance! Veel geluk! Viel Glück! Buena suerte! Buona fortuna! . . . .

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***In the 'I' of the Storm: the Simple Secrets of Writing & Speaking (Almost) like a Professional***, his recently published book, perceptively and entertainingly explains the key principles and practices of persuasive communication. It is available from the publishers in Ghent, Belgium ([www.storypublishers.be](http://www.storypublishers.be)) and Amazon ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).

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