

# 6 expert hacks for learning a new language and getting fluent fast

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Becoming bilingual is a huge life goal, albeit one that takes a serious amount of time and dedication. Here, language teachers list some fail-safe ways for building up your vocabulary and fluency in a new language as quickly as possible.

There are few more enriching challenges than learning a new language. It takes time and dedication, but being able to express yourself in a whole new tongue is hugely rewarding.

In fact, 64% of UK adults wish they had kept up the foreign language they studied at school, according to a British Council survey. This might explain the fact that the UK turned to language learning more than any other country over the pandemic, with data from language-learning app Duolingo showing new learners on the app in the UK rose by nearly 300% at the beginning of lockdown, with Spanish and French being the most popular.

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Plus, there's more to being bilingual than being able to order a beer on holiday. As French teacher Marie Triboulet points out: "Knowing another language lets you see the world in new ways and makes you more open-minded. It's also great for brain health and even helps prevent dementia." Indeed, research shows that bilingual brains develop dementia symptoms around five years later than their monolingual counterparts, while additional advantages include better memory and task management.

For me, learning Spanish has also been hugely character-building; as much a personal experience as an educational one. From an initial trip to Andalusia as a teenager, when I realised how far I had to go and almost gave up, I am now a confident speaker and have used my skills everywhere from Spain to South America and even at meetups more locally.

Being able to speak another language has given me transformative memories and helped me meet one of my best friends, Natalia (who treated me to the inside track on her native Madrid).

If you're tempted to take up a new language but worried about the studying involved, rest assured that the learning can be really enjoyable. As English teacher Martin Lavin highlights, you don't have to stick to traditional education. "Books and music are just two examples," he tells *Stylist*. "I even know someone who picked up a fair amount of Korean from watching K-pop."

From setting goals to streaming a series, here are six expert hacks to help you learn a new language and get fluent faster.

## Begin with the basics

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Regardless of whether you want to gabble in German or flirt in French, there are two elements you need to know: vocabulary (the words) and grammar (how to adapt the words and string them together). An ideal place to start is getting a quality book or downloading a trusted app for each.

When it comes to vocab, the sheer amount of words in a language can seem overwhelming – dictionaries often contain over 100,000 terms. Fortunately, you need just a fraction of that amount to communicate effectively. According to TV lexicographer Susie Dent, the average person's active vocabulary is 20,000 words, but academic Peter Howarth points out that 1,500 will achieve an intermediate level with 'some range.'


A good vocabulary resource will help you learn efficiently by grouping words into categories, such as most used words and cognates (words that are similar in both languages, for example, *gratitude* in English means the same as *gratitud* in Spanish).

As for grammar, Marie recommends investing in a book with exercises to help consolidate your knowledge. "Even better, vocalise the exercises; it's another way of practising what you've learnt," she adds.

Publisher McGraw Hill offers excellent learning resources for many languages.



Knowing another language lets you see the world in new ways and makes you more open-minded



## Create a routine and set (small) goals

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Martin reveals that there are many ways to sneak language learning into your everyday routine, "from changing the language on your phone to sticking verb conjugations on the bathroom door and even labelling household objects."

That said, he recommends carving out specific times in the week to study – whether it's completing one chapter in an exercise book each evening or watching a programme in the language you're learning every Sunday – to help you stay motivated. If you struggle to

incentivise yourself, consider joining a course, arranging regular sessions with a qualified teacher or even booking a test you can work towards: most languages have a recognised exam framework, such as the DELE diplomas in Spanish or CELI certificates in Italian.

Goals such as memorising 30 words a week can also be encouraging but Martin warns they need to be specific, realistic and short-term. “Saying I want to be fluent by ‘X’ time, for instance, is likely to be off-putting,” he warns, pointing out that ‘fluent’ is a loose term anyway. “We’re always learning new words; even in our own language we can’t expect to understand everything.”

I can attest to this: despite learning Spanish for almost two decades I’m still picking up new words regularly, especially jargon and colloquialisms.

## Stream a TV series

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It may sound too good to be true, but watching TV (or a film) does wonders for language acquisition, including for beginners. “It helps you get used to the rhythm, even if you don’t understand a word,” says Marie. TV shows also offer context and cultural insights, alongside authentic usage like slang.

“Start with YouTube tutorials in something you’re passionate about,” Marie suggests. Another option is sites like FluentU and News in Slow, which provide video clips with transcripts in both English and your target language.

If you’re ready for a series, several UK channels have top-notch foreign dramas with English subtitles, including the BBC and All 4’s Walter Presents. For subtitles in other languages, you’ll need an international platform like ARTE.tv or Netflix.

It’s also worth trying national channels in the relevant country; for example, I use Radio y Televisión Española, which provides Spanish subtitles for many shows. Watching Spanish shows with Spanish subtitles (while looking up keywords I don’t understand), is one of my favourite ways to learn. Entertaining and educational? Perfecto.

## Read, listen, play

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It’s not just TV that can boost language learning; from novels to newspapers and music to podcasts, there’s a wealth of tools at your disposal.

“Start with novels you’ve read in English; the familiarity will offer helpful clues,” Marie advises. “Or try ones with pictures like comics or non-fiction.”

Other handy hints include picking books with simple modern prose (imagine an English learner trying to decode Shakespeare) and, at least initially, a relatively short length.

“When learning French, I once tried a long classic,” says Martin. “It was too much of a challenge and put me off reading anything else for about two years.”

As with all media, you don't have to try and understand every single word while you're learning. As long as you get the gist, it doesn't matter.

Music is yet another entertaining way to get in some listening practice (I enjoy a bit of cheesy Latin pop and reggaetón when commuting or on a walk). Podcasts are also a linguistic treasure trove; you'll find a huge number of choices out there in many languages and for all levels.



| You don't need to be perfect, don't be afraid to get it wrong



## Get out there and socialise

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Needless to say, the more you use a language the more confident you'll become in it. Unfortunately, Marie says, people often avoid speaking in a foreign language out of fear that they'll make a mistake. "You don't need to be perfect, don't be afraid to get it wrong," she advises. Accepting that errors are inevitable was difficult for me, especially as a perfectionist, but my Spanish progressed rapidly once I did.

Armed with this mindset, opportunities to practise are plentiful. Sites like Meetup are great for conversation exchanges and major language institutions, such as Alliance Française, Instituto Cervantes and Goethe-Institut have UK branches with events programmes you can get involved with, even if you're not enrolled on a course. From cooking to cinema, these are also an interesting glimpse into a country's way of life.

You don't have to rely on language events or schools though "Think outside the box. If you're learning Spanish try some salsa, or visit a Spanish restaurant or festival," says Marie. I've enjoyed everything from Basque pintxo bars to flamenco festivities here in the UK, often meeting native Spanish speakers there.

## Go abroad

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While it's easier said than done at the moment thanks to travel restrictions, heading abroad to fully immerse yourself in the country whose language you're learning is one of the best ways to pick it up quickly.

When I was 19, I went on my first solo trip overseas for a two-month intensive summer course at the University of Salamanca. It turned out to be a personal rite of passage. Several hours of daily classes and activities, plus the opportunity to chat with locals, immersed me in the language and culture so fully, I soon got confident enough to shed my inhibitions around speaking the lingo.

Marie also champions travelling abroad and making the most of your time by "getting out of the anglophone bubble and going out to meet local people."

If you are thinking of studying abroad, many institutions are now welcoming international students again following the easing of pandemic restrictions, although UK citizens may need a visa to study in Europe following Brexit, so be sure to check the requirements for your desired country.



*Images: Getty, Marie Triboulet and Martin Lavin.*