

How to Learn a Language By Yourself

www.onmycanvas.com



Are you wondering how to learn a language by yourself? Or can you learn a language by yourself?

Let me tell you a story.

Before traveling to Chile, I couldn't speak any Spanish and wondered how I was going to survive in a predominantly Spanish continent. I thought that Latin Americans would make my life easy by conversing with me in English.

But neither the Latinos nor the foreigners living in Chile spoke English, at least not as much as I expected. That is when I realized that I had to learn Spanish. Reality hit me hard, and I prayed for my survival.

Learning Spanish in Chile, the land of notoriously bad Spanish, wasn't easy. I struggled from morning till night. I couldn't understand what were people saying at the dinner table. I longed to participate in conversations. I missed cracking jokes. I wanted to cry.

Words fell on my ears, but my brain couldn't comprehend them.

Rather than pitying myself, I decided that I had to learn enough Spanish so that I can understand the people around me and reply. And that is what I did.

Fast forwards a few weeks, I started speaking Spanish fluently. I was still a foreigner, but as I began to understand more Spanish, I became a part of the Chilean host family I was living with. We woke up, greeted each other by kissing both cheeks, made toast and ate it with avocados and Nescafe coffee, went about our day, and talked about life at the evening *Once*.

I had a second home now just because I could speak and understand Spanish.

Related read: [My journey of learning Spanish in South America](#) while I was backpacking in the continent.

Now when you know that you can learn a language by yourself, let us come to the next question.

Why do you want to learn a new language?

Maybe you want to travel or study abroad, or you want to work in a different country for your career options are better there, or you want to explore the world and live in various parts.

Language is the brain and heart of every community. If you're going to become a part of another culture and assimilate with people at the other end of the world, you will have to speak their language else you will not understand their lives and will always remain a foreigner.

To survive or to feel at home anywhere, invest time in understanding the foreign language.

If you have the right motivation, you can learn a language on your own.

Also Read: [Why I travel](#) and live as a nomad.



You can sail across the world if you speak with the people who are waiting at the shores.

But what does learning a language mean?

Language is not only words and grammar. Language consists of the slang, the local dialects, the speed and rhythm with which its spoken, the abbreviations, and the idioms which people use. Understanding all these dimensions of the language in addition to learning the vocabulary and speaking the words is what learning a language means.

But now you can also imagine how hard it can be to learn a language by yourself.

Learning Spanish was an adventurous and challenging climb for me. I invested many hours every day while studying Spanish and talking to people so that I could speak the language colloquially.

When people heard me converse in Spanish after a few months of my stay in Latin America, they thought that I had been speaking for years and refused to believe that I did not speak Spanish before traveling to the continent. From blankly watching friends' faces to making the same friends laugh and run behind me as I pulled their legs in their language, I went through an incredible journey.



I am not the self-propaganda parrot Iago from Arabian nights; I am trying to earn credibility. Image Source: Cyberchase Wiki

In this learn a new language guide, I am listing down all the ways that helped me master Spanish in a few weeks. My tips will help, I promise, but you would need a motivation to learn a language for it is not an easy task.

The Internet has a plethora of language learning tutorials and applications. Irrespective of which ones you pick, use these ways to learn a foreign language.

Let's get you started.

Here are my 24 best tips on learning a foreign language by yourself.

1. Find a native speaker of the foreign language —

The need to speak the language is the biggest push to learn a new language. I could speak Spanish in a few weeks because I was surrounded by people who only spoke Spanish and I had to converse with them. But I cannot still talk in Kannada, the local language of Bangalore, because almost everyone in Karnataka speaks Hindi or English.

If you have to talk to a native speaker, you will not only have a necessity to speak the target language, but you will also have access to someone who knows the language thoroughly. **Talking to a native speaker will make you think in the language you want to learn.**

But how will you find a native speaker of the language?

Many people, like you, want to learn new languages, and you can have a language exchange with these language aspirants. You can easily find a native of the target language with one of the many free or budget-friendly online language learning applications and websites. Some of the sites which offer language exchanges are [iTalki](#), [My Language exchange](#), Couch Surfing(look for coffee and conversation in the same city), [The Mixxer](#), [Polyglot club](#), [LingoGlobe](#), [SprachDuo](#), and [Verbling](#).

Most of these language learning platforms let you connect with learners on the go, and some allow scheduling a session. You can also find like-minded people in meetups in your city or on social media. Use Skype or any other voice over call media and get started.

For the rest of the article let us assume that you are either in the country of the target language or you speak to at least one native speaker of that language regularly.



Now distant from the Spanish lands, I video call these Chilean friends to practice Spanish.

2. Watch and listen to the native speaker talking in the target language—

I watched Latin Americans with blank expressions. I listened patiently to them for so long that they even got conscious of my constant stares. But by observing them I was absorbing the nuances of Spanish communication, without even knowing.

Pay attention to how people greet each other, how do they wish good morning and goodbye, what do they say when they overeat or are late for a party, how fast they are speaking, the sounds they make, et cetera.

Listen and observe, as much as you can. Soon you would start speaking the words that they used in the same accent and while making the same sounds.

3. Start speaking the foreign language—

Before a kitchen helper can become a trainee to a chef, he or she has to peel kilos of garlic every day. The helper has to first stink and only then he can do something better.

Start speaking the language irrespective of incorrect grammar, incomplete sentences, missing articles, and an awkward accent. Don't be embarrassed or hide behind the convenience of not knowing the language.

If you don't have anyone to listen to you when you want to speak, just record an audio message and play it later for your language partner.

Once you overcome the inertia against speaking, you are many steps closer to learning the language.

4. Use facial expressions, point at objects, and act with hands —

Sometimes when I had finished speaking a Spanish sentence, I used to create sinusoidal waves going to the left with my hands. The waves signified that what I said had happened in the past, for I didn't know the past tenses in Spanish until then.

Either you can blankly stare at a colleague or pick up a pen to show that you need stationery. If you want to ask her the age of her daughter, shift your hand vertically to guess her height.

You get the idea.

Design your own hand movements and facial expressions to add to the broken conversation. Your gestures will aid the discussion and the person with whom you are speaking will be more willing to continue.



When strangers approached me to talk, I reciprocated with smiles and tried communicating with hand movements. When they saw that I was trying hard to learn Spanish, they became more patient to understand my naive Spanish.

5. Forget shyness —

Draw those curtains of shame. You would never learn otherwise. I knew volunteers who could not speak Spanish, even by the end of our four months English teaching program, as they were too shy to say anything after a *hola*. You have to face the fear of speaking incorrectly or embarrassing yourself.

Remember — even if you don't speak, people know that you don't know their language. Then what are you hesitant about?

Also Read: [15 things we can care less about](#)



We can't always hide under a blanket to turn away from our fears

6. Label objects at home and office —

Dr. Kenneth Higbee, memory expert and author of the book [Your Memory: How It Works and How to Improve It](#), says: It is the disorganization in your mind, not the amount of material, that hinders memory.

Label all the objects that you can put a sticker on at your office and home. When you look at the words frequently, they will get added to your vocabulary. You can buy the labels of any language online. Here are some [Spanish ones](#). that I really liked.

Label objects and notice yourself remembering that you need huevos when you are walking back to home from work.

7. Practice the basic grammar rules from a grammar book —

My English-teaching volunteer program gave me a Spanish workbook which expedited my learning process. Apart from explaining the basic grammar of Spanish, the book also listed easily confused words, false friends, and incorrectly used verbs.

I practiced grammar exercises and discussed them with friends every day. By reading and writing the words and resolving my doubts with the native speakers, I laid a strong foundation for my Spanish.

Find a grammar book of the target language. Then start practicing grammar rules from it one by one. Live with present tense, then accept past, and then prepare for the future. Explore a few regular and irregular verbs every day. Learn to modify the tense form of verbs.

Buy a practice book and study like a child. When you write a word or a sentence correctly in five attempts, the chances of you getting it wrong will be close to zero. You will be able to think the right tense for the verb while speaking because you had practiced the tenses and their rules.

Related read: [Volunteer and Teach English in Chile](#) with English Open Doors Program

8. Ask questions —

Whenever I thought my host mother was going to thrash me for confusing between the Spanish words for snowy(nevado) and clouded(nublado), she explained even better. People have much more patience than we credit them for.

Ask questions from your language exchange partner or in meetups and online forums. Your interest and resilience increase others' motivation to help you.

9. Watch movies and TV shows in the language you want to learn —

I can't remember how many telenovelas I watched while I was in South America. What was the master plan of the vamp in *'Te Doy La Vida'*, what time was *'A Corazón Abierto'* telecasted, and what was the wicked lady in *'La Raina del Sur'* planning to do next were on my fingertips. But also some of the words and phrases the characters spoke and how they spoke them.

Watching the tv shows and the cinema of the target language is not only a way to practice the language, but you can also learn a lot about the culture. While having fun, you develop your vocabulary, pick up the colloquial words, gestures, and accents.

As you hear more people speak the language, you also start thinking in the language, thus eventually speaking it and understanding it better.



Pick up words from wherever you can.

10. Understand the concepts rather than learning the answers—

When my Chilean friend said good morning to a teaching colleague, I learned the phrase and repeated it the next time I met my friend. She laughed. I hadn't replaced the "he" with "she."

You can learn the solution to one linear equation in Mathematics but to solve another, you need to know the concept. **Don't memorize the answer; understand the steps. You can then modify the language and use it as per your convenience.**

Also Read: [12 Principles that have helped me achieve my goals](#)

11. Don't leave even a single chance to practice the language you want to learn —

I recited the recipe of an Indian curry to my host mother because I wanted to learn the utensils' and spatula names. Our conversation was hilarious.

Watch a Bollywood movie with your target language subtitles. Find a recipe you want to cook in the language you want to learn. Change the language of your phone and computer to the target language. Search for popular podcasts.

The more you have to see and understand the new language, the more you will think in the language.

12. Write in the language —

Take small notes. Write your dreams. List numbers.

Once you start writing in the target language, you will never forget the words that you wrote down.

13. Listen to Audio lessons —

Almost all the languages have online podcasts to which you can tune into and keep listening. The podcasts are a combination of audio lessons, dialogues, tips, and tricks. Here is a [Spanish one](#) that I am thinking of purchasing just for fun.

Listening to someone speak to us is sometimes more impactful than reading ourselves.

14. Keep translation applications handy —

Google Translate and Spanish Dict were like those emergency phone calls back home when you are making butter chicken, and you forget whether you add cream before or after adding the tomatoes.

Translation applications are handy while directing a taxi, shopping, or during a conversation. But if you have some free time, you can use the applications to learn new words by translating whatever comes to your mind.

Translation applications aren't perfect, but they are good to learn the basics.



If you see a cow, just translate cow to know what it means in, let's say, German. The more you make yourself think in the foreign language, the faster you will learn.

15. Know the right order of learning —

Before traveling to Latin America, I tried learning Spanish with DuoLingo but the application proved useless. The course started with greetings, a few words from the everyday vocabulary, how are you, and that is about it. It never came to daily conversations.

Start with greetings, then daily short questions such as did you eat lunch or want a cup of tea — these everyday conversations would ease your way into the language slowly and naturally.

Then come numbers, time, pronouns, introductory phrases, routine verbs such as to be, need, want, say, come, go, have, eat, drink, party, read, learn, forget, watch, work, live, see, sit, sleep, shower, wash, clean.

Relations, surrounding objects, seasons, places, temperature, professions, come next.

Start with less. When I started speaking Spanish, I used to thrust out a string of jumbled words without articles, pronouns, and right tenses. Then I started adding these missing constructors one by one.

Choose an online tutorial or application that respects the order of learning.

Also Read: [Learning The Art of Learning with Josh Waitzkin](#), the chess prodigy and world champion.

16. Read out loud —

By reading out loud you can practice the sounds, accents, and the pronunciations of the target language. Just pick up a book or an article on the internet and read it out loud as if you are narrating it to someone.

The more you read out loud, the more confidently you will speak in the public.

17. Write the phonetics in your native language —

I used to write down the phonetics of the Spanish words in Hindi. Thus I could refer to the correct pronunciation, which my Chilean friends had told me, whenever I was doubtful.

Ask your language exchange partner to enunciate the word for you. You can also listen to the correct pronunciation by playing the Google Translate voice feature. Then write down the phonetics in your native language and refer to them whenever you need.

You can learn the correct sounds of the new language if you know the right phonetics.

Helpful read if you are learning Spanish: [Important phrases](#) of Spanish with Hindi and English Phonetics

18. Don't be lazy —

Learning a language is a lot of work but extremely rewarding. When you finally start understanding jokes in the language you are learning or can tell your friend that he cooked a good meal, the effort seems worth it.

When you start speaking a foreign language, you have found another culture that you can become part of. As I said before, find the right motivation. And don't give up.

Also Read: [Make a schedule to live and work better](#)



Rest, but don't let go.

19. Focus on details —

In Yoga, we bent down and try to touch our forehead to the knees little by little, to achieve the perfect posture. It takes months to put all the body parts at the right angles.

Similarly, when you start learning another language, you would be far from perfect. But learn from the mistakes that you make. By focusing on the details you can slowly improve your language skills.

Notice, listen, think, repeat, write, improve, repeat.

20. Don't get offended —

Learning a Colloquial language is an art. You can only speak a language like its native speakers if you talk to the native speakers and let them correct you. But if you take offense, people would not point out your mistake, and that is the last thing you want.

If you are attentive, you grasp the accent, appropriate words, modifications, speed, and idioms. These amalgamate you with the people. I have seen truck drivers, who let me hitchhike, light up as I

referred to them as *Caballero* (gentlemen). Or women gleaming with pride as I complimented their cheese empanadas with idioms.

But for colloquial learning, you can't get offended. Keep your pride on the side.

Also Read: [Why are human relationships important](#) and how to create them



You cannot pounce at anyone who is trying to help you when you learn a new language.

21. Crack jokes —

If people laugh at your jokes, you are making progress.

Cracking funny jokes in a foreign language shows that you understand the language and its philosophy.

22. Be patient —

The appropriate greeting and accent and softness won't come in a few days or even in a few weeks.

We all learn at our own pace. Be easy on yourself, and take a break sometimes.

Related Read that will calm you down: [Process of Learning](#) is more important than the result.

23. Be prepared to feel like an idiot and lose it sometimes—

Once at the pharmacy, it struck me that I had not practiced the Spanish words for sanitary napkins. I stood there staring at the pharmacist as if I was trying to recall a complex chemical equation. Believe me; it gets worse.

Don't think that you are forced to learn a language. Instead, embrace that you are studying something new, voluntarily, and have fun with it.

You would pull your hair — more than you imagined. Pour a glass of wine and Netflix.



Be patient. You will not gain anything by roaring.

24. Conversation. Conversation. Conversation —

I took a French course in college, but I cannot speak any French now as I never practiced French. On the contrary, I spoke as much Spanish as I could while I was traveling in South America. I remember most of it even now, after more than a year of having left the continent.

Grab any chance of conversation in the foreign language and start speaking.

Helpful Read: [Hiking the Villarrica volcano](#) taught me that we need to put one step a time.



When parrots can speak any language, why can't you?

Your hard work will pay off. You would be able to travel the world and work wherever you want to. People would remember what you said when their son was in the hospital or how you cracked a joke or offered your help when your friend was struggling to stuff a turkey.

One day, the natives would find your 'how are you' the most colloquial and would tell you that you are a pro at their language.